

A Novel

998

EDWARD HYAMS

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**A novel by
Edward Hyams**

998

Three young naval officers, drunk with a combination of liquor and high spirits, weld a weird instrument to the mast of a neutral warship. Thus begins 998, conceived as a joke and carried to phenomenal existence with red tape as the bustling midwife. 998 is a farcically funny tale poking fun at the woes and worries of our time, exposing our suicidal monkey tricks, and spoofing the colossal vanity and self-deceit of the mighty. Admirals, ambassadors, politicians, journalists, all come under fire. As 998 snowballs to fantastic proportions, each nation exposes its own particular folly, its special brand of egotism and hypocrisy.

The hero, Sylvester, inventor of a gadget as terrible as the H-bomb, though much more simple to produce, is a man of candor and good-will, a 20th-century Candide floundering in the consequences of his joke. He has to cope with such threats as annihilation, a seductive and scheming female, and pre-frontal leucotomy, and ends up a thoroughly confused human being, much like the rest of us.

Mr. Hyams' satire is witty and brilliant, but it is not cynical. It is obvious that he is seriously concerned with the dangerously irresponsible use of scientific instruments of destruction. In the last analysis, this is a moral tale, and its ebullient humor is heightened by an underlying seriousness of purpose.

See also back flap

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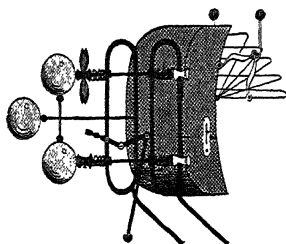
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A N O V E L B Y

EDWARD HYAMS

PANTHEON BOOKS

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MANUFACTURED IN THE U.S.A.
BY H. WOLFF, NEW YORK, N.Y.

Dedicated to the second begetter, with
an apology borrowed from Juvenal . . .

Difficile est non satiram scribere

Author's Note

This story is set in recent historical time, but moves faster than history's events. It has therefore been necessary to telescope time to some extent, bringing events which have happened in the last few years more closely together. The reader will, we hope, hardly notice this, and his or her indulgence is craved for the device.

E.H.

This novel is a work of fiction and the
persons, institutions and events
depicted herein are imaginary

. . . Je sçai aussi, dit Candide, qu'il faut cultiver notre jardin. Vous avez raison, dit Pangloss; car l'homme fut mis dans le jardin d'Eden, il y fut mis *ut operaretur eum*, pour qu'il travaillât, ce qui prouve que l'homme n'est pas né pour le repos. Travailler sans raisonner, dit Martin, c'est le seul moyen de rendre la vie supportable.

Candide VOLTAIRE

I

ON the night in 1945 following the announcement of victory in Europe, the destroyer in which Sylvester Green was serving as Flotilla Radar Officer berthed in Rosyth. She had brought north a convoy of merchantmen, and now lay alongside a corvette, obviously built in Britain, but wearing foreign colors. Sylvester, while waiting for the two other officers with whom he was going ashore to celebrate victory, asked the Bos'n of the Watch about their neighbor, and learned that she was the principal unit of the Agrarian navy. Agraria was known to Sylvester as a Republic near Italy, with a thousand-year history of obstinate neutrality; but his friends joining him, the subject was dismissed from his mind.

From his infancy Sylvester Green had been candid, simple and high-spirited. His father kept a wireless shop in a London suburb, made a good living and spent his leisure in filling in football coupons. Mrs. Green was a small, grey and acquiescent woman, who liked to sit in front of a coal fire, with her hands clasped in her lap, and be thankful that she was no longer forced to live among vulgar people. She had only one positive taste, or rather distaste, acquired in contact with the somewhat raffish population of Mile End, from which marriage had saved her: she hated all that was what she called "common," with such determination that she succeeded in persuading her husband to spend money on their son's education, rather than allow that promising youth to mix with the children at the state school.

Sylvester was sent to a private school where, his mother felt, he would become genteel. The Principal was a clergyman and a Master of Arts whose practice it was to pick out the brightest of the new boys and coach them personally, to the glory of his school, leaving the undistinguished majority to the mercy of his assistant masters, whom he hired as cheaply as possible. Sylvester was one of those distinguished by the master, and having a good memory, being gifted with vitality, and capable of application, he won a scholarship which carried him to a respectable grammar school in the vicinity.

There his English was corrected, and he acquired a sort of Latin, but it was not by humane studies that his curiosity was aroused. It so happened that the science master was a man who loved his work and was gifted; he might, indeed, like other physicists, have made a name for himself, and even a fortune, by devising some uncommonly outrageous and destructive weapon of war. He suffered, however, from a debilitating love of humanity which disqualified him from competing with fellow scientists for the honors of providing the race with new and more atrocious methods of manslaughter.

From this tutor Sylvester learned to interest himself in electro-magnetism, and left school exceptionally well equipped to take over the maintenance side of his father's business. He had, however, hardly been at work for a year, when war broke out. Sylvester was of an age to be called up among the first, and having chosen the Navy, was fortunate in being directed to that Service. After training, he was about to be drafted to a ship, when a call went out for electrical and radio technicians required to be trained for mysterious duties. Sylvester, attracted by the idea of following his own trade, offered himself. In this manner he became one of the first of the new ratings called

Radio Mechanics, whose business it was to maintain the Fleet's radar arm.

During the following six months Sylvester worked as a student at a technical college, after which he found himself, belatedly, a member of a ship's company, with the rate of Leading Hand, and the privileges of a Petty Officer.

The Captain of Sylvester's ship was an R.N. officer who disliked and distrusted the new device. His former Radio Mechanic had been quite unable to keep the apparatus working, which relieved the Captain of the necessity to make use of it. Sylvester's efficiency was a thorn in his side, and he got rid of him by recommending him, in the strongest possible terms, for a Commission. Sylvester was summoned to Portsmouth and interviewed by a scientist. Shortly thereafter he found himself dressed in black vicuna instead of blue serge, gold braid instead of red badges; and undergoing a course which was, to his earlier one, like the work of Einstein to that of a bank-clerk.

Sylvester's experiences as a naval officer in action make no part of this narrative. He had never imagined that life could be so pleasant and so amusing. As a sub-lieutenant, and subsequently as a lieutenant in charge of the radar of a whole flotilla of destroyers, he was a person of consequence, which he certainly would not have been as a wireless salesman. The manners and customs by which he found himself living were devised by men of breeding, and were a good deal superior to those obtaining in the world of retail trade. He had a servant to wait on him, a Ward Room with some of the amenities, all the atmosphere and none of the expense of a first-class club. He was well fed, provided with drinks and tobacco free of duty, living among men of intelligence who liked him and whom he liked, who depended upon him for the integrity of his skill, as he did upon them. He did not spend his pay and

allowances, so that he was making money all the time. He was often in great physical discomfort and much danger, a perfectly natural condition for a young man, and preferable to the dreary security of shopkeeping in a suburb. For the first time in his life, he was seeing, every day and hour, the splendor and beauty of the world, the sea in calm and storm, the sky in all its moods and colors.

It is true that he was sometimes called upon, in exchange for all his advantages, to blow to pieces, drown, boil, poison, disembowel, blind, paralyze, and in other ways discomfort a number of German mariners against whom he had no ill-feeling. It occasionally occurred to him that this was an odd service to render humanity, but he set his conscience at rest by accepting the example and reassurances of his secular and spiritual leaders.

2

IT was on their way back from celebrating victory in the bars of Edinburgh, that Sylvester and his party collected the broken perambulator and the pawnbroker's sign. They had, being drunk, decided to walk all the way back to Rosyth, and had lost themselves in the sinister, or merely dreary squalor of the Old Town, on their way out. Along narrow streets between towering tenements, up and down the cobbled hills, in and out of areas of deep shade, and yellow sulphurous light from a full moon, the group of officers steered a course so erratic that it suggested an unbreak-

able habit of submarine evasion, even on dry land. From time to time the reeling, singing party of rejoicing victors broke out of the regions of this checker work of light and shade, into the open spaces caused by bombing, great gaps of sour clay and rubble in the town's close and huddling continuity. Presently, in such a waste place, they found the perambulator. The machine had still its long carriage-springs, its two axles and two handles, but only two wheels. It was a vestige, out of which some archaeologist as yet unconceived might have built up the whole structure of the mechanical age. Alone in the plain of broken masonry, it was a rather obvious symbol: the skull of Yorick in Hamlet's hands. The group of young men fell abruptly silent, they were almost sobered. It was Sylvester who saved them from succumbing to the influence of the perambulator and its environment. He recovered from the threat of sobriety, flung himself upon the portentous relic with a cry of derision, and pushing it before him on its two wheels, began to address and cajole an imaginary infant, in the whining snarl of an overworked and underfed mother of eight, pushing this living *atê* before her among the weary shopping crowds of some suburban market. The imitation was not good, it was far from funny, but it sufficed. Sylvester's companions seized upon this means of dispelling the *mi-asma* of gloom and portent which threatened them, and in a moment they were all petting the imaginary child, discussing its ailments, and nagging imaginary husbands.

The spirits of the party began to rise again, as if their drunkenness had been restored to them by a good-natured God. Presently, still clowning about the wrecked perambulator, they came to a dim junction of alleys, where a wedge-shaped tenement crushed its seven, uneven stories down upon a small and low-browed pawnshop. There was, in all the murk, one spot of golden light, for the waning moon

caught the polished surface of the three brass balls. That glitter was too much for the officers; like magpies they gathered beneath it, chattering, until the resonant brogue of Surgeon-Lieutenant Mordaunt proclaimed to his companions, and to the night-haunted town, his desire to possess the object.

Sylvester abandoned the pram, and in an instant the Irishman was teetering upon the shoulders of his friend, wrenching at the rotten iron of the bracket, with no regard for a precarious equilibrium. In another moment Mordaunt, the pawn sign, and Sylvester were in the gutter, the whole group involved in a complicated and melancholy figure of waving limbs, laughter and cursing, which sorted itself again into individual forms. Sylvester, unhurt, was on his feet and, with string from his pocket, lashing the new trophy to the old. Presently, in procession, all went forward again, Sylvester leading with the pram and its burden until, coming suddenly out into a wide thoroughfare, where lorry-drivers were gathered about a mobile canteen, they were able, after a little bargaining, to load themselves and their burden on to an empty truck, and so complete their journey to the dockside.

Their truck, it transpired, was come to collect a party of fitters working late aboard the corvette *Agraria*. A party of welders were still busy fitting a directional radio aerial to the forebridge. The ship was entirely abandoned by her company, all of whom were at an official reception in London. Only a watchman sat by the gangway, and he was asleep over his coke brazier. As Sylvester and his friends clambered out of the lorry their attention was attracted to the only brilliant light in the whole marine jungle of masts, funnels, cranes and derricks, the deck of the Agrarian ship, where half a dozen arc-lamps lighted the welders at their work. But as they looked, the lights went out and the men

began to make their ways to the truck, leaving their gear on deck ready for the resumption of work in the morning.

The party of officers watched the party of workmen take their places in the truck. They stood close and rather sheepishly about the pram and the brass balls, for that complex totem was losing its magic; from having been an achievement, it was turning into an incubus. The spirits of its guardians were drooping again, and the strength of the drink had gone out of them, or perhaps lay dormant, like a yeast ferment in a cold room. But the night of celebration must not be allowed to slop into anti-climax: it must be saved again, like a relapsing Christian. It was Sylvester who, for the second time, took the lead: the lorry, with its load of welders, had hardly disappeared in the direction of the dark town, when he asked, "Anyone here understand welding?"

No one did.

"Well, I do. The rest of you can help me. Come along, and bring baby."

Sylvester crossed the gangway, the other two followed him, carrying the pram and the pawn sign. There followed a minute of stumbling and fumbling about the dark and encumbered deck, and then the arc-lights shone again. And presently the scene resolved itself into the order of a small working party about Sylvester, who held an eye-shade in his left hand and with the other manipulated the welding tool. From the point of the tool a brilliant and noisy arc of electric blue burned and spluttered against the steel of the forebridge.

3

AMONG the alleged intelligence tests occasionally published by newspapers is one which involves the recognition of familiar objects presented by the photographer from an unusual point of view. Accustomed as man is to a particular view of the world, whereby everything appears as seen from a vertical displacement of 5 ft. 6 in. from the surface of the globe, he finds the utmost difficulty in recognizing images which are commonplaces to flies, birds, mice or poets.

The manner in which Sylvester and his accomplices had welded their finds to the forebridge of the corvette, no doubt contributed to the difficulty of recognizing their origins. The plane of the triangle formed by the three brass balls had been made parallel with the horizon, and the sign was placed within the upended chassis of the pram, composing a single system from which radiated a number of businesslike-looking cables. A coat of grey paint had given the whole a homogeneous appearance. A glance round the basin of the harbor, full of warships bedraggled with devices having the appearance of umbrella-stands, fish-traps, spring mattresses, and other stock from a junk shop, and all of which were, in fact, the antennae of various and rapidly multiplying radar contrivances, such a glance would have left the observer unmoved by Sylvester's invention. That construction had, in fact, a formidably complex, and yet a compact air which compared favorably with many of the others. And it was obviously something new and advanced. After the ship's painters had given it another coat

of grey paint, making it less conspicuous, there was nothing, or very little, about it to enable the sharpest eye to detect a fraud.

It was thus that the Radar Officer of H.M.S. *Ross and Cromarty*, a county class cruiser, being early on deck for a breath of air before breakfast, studied the new device without surprise but with a good deal of consternation. A conscientious officer, he spent a great deal of his leisure time in trying to keep abreast of the new radar developments. But the sets, and the cryptic manuals describing them, poured from the teeming brains of Admiralty technicians faster than any ordinary man could study them. The cruiser's officer stared, muttering, at the Agrarian ship, aware that once again the busy scientists had outdistanced him. He hastened to the ship's side to get a closer view of the new aerial. Below him, in the prow of his destroyer, Sylvester stood surveying his handiwork with something between anxiety and satisfaction: the joke was quite good, but the consequences might be less so.

Sylvester started guiltily when the cruiser's officer, seeing the green stripe between the gold lace on Sylvester's arm, hailed him from above.

"I say, Radar!"

Sylvester turned, looked up, saw the extra half-ring of gold, and saluted.

"Sir?"

The cruiser man jerked his head towards the *Agraria's* aerial.

"New, isn't it?"

Sylvester might safely have pleaded total ignorance, but it was not in him to abandon a piece of work or a piece of clowning. He said:

"I think it might be Type 998, sir."

"Oh . . ." A brief pause, and then; "I fancy you're right.

I'd forgotten it." That answer, or something like it, was inevitable: one did not admit ignorance to a junior officer, and a small-ship man at that. The two technicians stared owlishly at this latest manifestation of the advance of their craft. Presently, leaning over the rail to speak as confidentially as possible, the lieutenant-commander suggested:

"Pretty short wavelength, as I recall it."

Sylvester's face went blank, and he made a slight motion with his head towards a submarine, moored a little way further along the jetty. She was Russian, and one of her officers was standing in front of the conning tower, examining the new aerial through a pair of field glasses. The cruiser's officer looked annoyed, and said:

"He can't hear."

Sylvester, responsibility discharged, named a figure.

"Centimetres, of course?"

"Millimetres, sir."

"Good Lord! But aren't those connections ordinary cables?"

"Wave-guide tubes, I think, sir."

"So they are. I wasn't looking carefully enough." The senior officer tried to measure with his eye the gauge of the connections radiating from the aerial. He asked, casually:

"Seen a copy of the handbook?"

"Yes, but we haven't got one, of course."

The other nodded, took a last look at the contraption, muttered that it was queer the set should be fitted to a foreigner, and went below thinking that it was not only queer, but humiliating. It had seemed to him before that his ship was not being properly fed with the latest gear. She was an important ship; she had been in two major actions; her Captain was an Honorable and a friend of Mr. Churchill. She ought certainly to have the best of

everything, and here she was struggling along with old apparatus, while some miserable tub, hardly better than a trawler, and a dago at that, had this new and superior gear. It really would not do. After breakfast, he decided, he would go ashore and see S.R.O. Forth Command, and make a complaint on behalf of his ship. He would never get that gold leaf on his cap peak before demobilization, if he did not keep himself in the official eye.

4

AMONG the ever more numerous fleet of war-weary ships which crowded into the anchorage at Rosyth, threatening the remnant of sanity left to a harassed Admiral Superintendent, moved a fast naval launch carrying the imposing person of John Agar Simes, the most brilliant war correspondent of the day. He stood in a characteristic attitude on the deck of the boat, his hands deep in the pockets of an immense tweed ulster, his hat jammed over his eyes, looking rather like a General in the Irish Republican Army. His half-hidden eyes were busy, flicking up and down and from side to side with the impressive persistence of mechanical toys. For Simes was thorough; Simes was probably, if not certainly, the best-informed man in the Western world. Over the informative outpourings of Mr. John Gunther he was used to smile indulgently, and very, very slowly to raise his right shoulder and his left eyebrow. Gunther? Good in his way. Industrious. Well-

meaning. But, of course, he wrote the things which could be written: whereas himself, Simes . . .

It was not to his thoroughness and penetration alone that Simes owed his elevation in his profession: equally extraordinary was his tropism for news. But perhaps tropism is not the right word: he was, rather, a catalyst, and news happened where he was. Rival journalists said that this was luck, but it was nothing of the sort, for Simes had made the discovery, early in his career, that news, like life, is what you make it.

He had originally been by trade a salesman of advertising space in a weekly journal, his customers being for the most part vendors of patent medicines, Art (or Paris) postcards, cheap cosmetics and other products of capitalism in flower. But from time to time he contributed paragraphs of news to a national daily newspaper, for he traveled about the country and was by nature inquisitive. His real start upon the path to fame, however, came about as follows: on an evening during the August news famine he got drunk in a Birmingham drinking hell, and being drunk, became amorous. Upon emerging from the public-house on a restless quest for adventure, he was irresistibly driven to press his attentions upon a young woman coming out of the Jug and Bottle department, with a jug of stout for her father's supper. Simes' gallantry was importunate and urgent, the girl was only thirteen, a policeman was in the vicinity, and Simes was taken in charge for indecent assault.

Such a misfortune would certainly have cowed and even broken a small man: Simes made it the foundation of his fortune. By an arrangement with the good-natured constable who had arrested him, and who wanted his name in the papers in order to please his wife, Simes was able, on the way to the Station, to send a telegram to his editor. *Well-known journalist arrested for indecent assault*, was

the headline he himself suggested. Subsequently, in the magistrate's court, he defended himself with such fireworks of eloquence that the case was widely and prominently reported. Simes flatly denied the charge, he stormed and ranted: with brassy effrontery he suggested that his part in the recent exposure, by his paper, of some of the city fathers was known, and that his arrest was a plant. He hinted that that same exposure had been incomplete, and he so hovered and darted about the names and reputations of half a dozen other city worthies that the magistrates, who were involved, became alarmed. Moreover, the girl in the case was the accused's ally from the beginning: an ardent film fan, a reader of American magazines, and of the picture papers, she came into court heavily made up, simpering, flattered, happy. Her cultivated, if rather gross archness, her ogling of the Bench, her voluptuous writhing under police questioning, her fits of giggling and her confused and ambiguous answers, led the magistrates, elderly men with but little understanding of modern English maidenhood, into the erroneous conclusion that the girl was a whore. The case was dismissed, with costs against the police, and Simes was launched.

Even with so magnificent a beginning, few men could have made so much of an opportunity as Simes. But he had studied and understood the craft he was to practice with such distinction. He knew that journalistic ability resided not in any absolute news value, but rather in the relative news resistance or permeability of the public at any given moment. Thus, he understood exactly when to report the removal of three tiles from a suburban roof by a gust of wind, and the striking, by one of them, of a passing bank messenger, as *Gale Spreads Havoc in Village Homes. Financier Gravely Injured in Hurricane . . .* and when to leave it out. But Simes did not stop there: on one

occasion, when his proprietor had wished to remove a certain recalcitrant member of the Government from office, Simes had reported a freak storm in a corner of Argyllshire, which had spoiled half an acre of inferior oats, as *Frost and Hail Ruin Crops. Land-girl risks life to Save Wheat. Will Potatoes Be Rationed?* Next to this he printed a photograph of the Minister of Food, the unfortunate politician in question eating a meal in an Italian café under brilliant sunshine, and in the company of a beautiful girl.

"But the force," he would explain in the privacy of his professional club, "the force of the thing was not in what we published, but in what we left out . . . as that the girl was the Minister's daughter, and that he was on his way to a most unpleasant conference at Split, where an American-financed cannery was going to force him to buy fifty-thousand tons of spoiled hake, as Greek salmon, under threat of stopping the delivery of sardines."

Such was Simes, such his skill, subtle, penetrating, clever. And this was the first journalist to see the strange Radar antennae upon the small Agrarian warship, to realize that it was something new, something more complex and formidable than all those umbrella-stands, fish-traps, mattresses and mere abstract designs in tubular copper, with all of which he was perfectly familiar.

Not, he supposed, huddling into the vast collar of his greatcoat against the bitter brilliance of the Scottish morning, that he would be able to make use of anything he might discover. There was no firmer or more loyal supporter than Agar Simes of that gentlemen's agreement between Press and Government whereby the Press is told everything but prints only what suits its informants. And whether or no the new antenna stood for a printable story, Simes wanted to know it.

He took his hands from the pockets of his coat, and with one of them a stout notebook. To the Cox'n of the boat he said:

"Put me aboard *Ross and Cromarty*," and nodded amiably to the latter's professionally hearty *Aye, Aye, sir*.

Simes consulted his book under the heading which bore, in his private cryptograms, the name of that cruiser. He found the name of the Radar Officer, Lieutenant-Commander Oswald Voles, and noted that, in civil life, that officer was an insurance salesman. Mr. Simes smiled: this was going to be easy.

5

CAPTAIN OWBRIDGE, the Senior Radar Officer, Forth Command, was neither a technical man nor an R.N.V.R. officer, although his branch was exclusively staffed from the Reserve. The golden rings on his arm were honorably straight, and stood boldly out against the black of the cloth without being in any way dimmed by the adjacency of any colored braid. Such colors, although proclaiming that the wearer is in receipt of specialist's pay, are also the stigmata of a certain inferiority to the pure gold of the Executive Branch. With the possible exception of the Engineer's purple, even the most inexperienced rating is aware that his salute need not be quite so smart, his bearing not quite so sailorly, where he perceives colored braid among the gold.

It was, no doubt, for this reason that heads of Branches were invariably R.N. executive officers, trained to exercise authority and tact rather than intelligence . . . unless of the purely military order. Captain Owbridge was representative of that class of professional naval officers than which England has produced nothing more admirable. He was everything that was well-bred. Upon taking up his office he had realized that he was required to turn himself into an advanced physicist, with a thorough knowledge of higher mathematics, molecular physics, electro-magnetism, wave dynamics and fifty ancillary subjects. He had made his personal charm and his air of authority do duty for all of these. He had one attribute of the Nelson touch: his technical staff became a band of brothers, and their family solidarity was such that if mistakes were made, they were kept in the family.

This band of brothers consisted of his own shore-based technical staff, and, honorary brothers as it were, those radar officers whose ships were based on Rosyth and who, therefore, looked to Captain Owbridge to help them in maintaining their gear. Among these was Lieutenant-Commander Voles, R.N.V.R., and with him, it must be confessed, the Captain had never felt perfectly at ease. With the majority of his R.N.V.R. officers, men who had mastered a technique vastly in advance of those which they practiced in civilian life, Owbridge felt something very like humility. Had one of his fellow mandarins pointed out that these young men had nasty secondary-school accents, he would have been surprised and pained, for he had not even noticed this misfortune. But with Voles it was different, for by imposing upon his natural and inoffensive cockney vowels a sort of teashop waitress's refinement, in the presence of his superiors, Voles thrust upon the Captain's attention something which forced

him to feel superior, and thereafter mean and petty. Moreover, Voles was a sea lawyer, a complainer: he complained of his apparatus, of his Sub-Lieutenant, of his radio mechanics, of his radar operators. Here he was again, complaining, complaining:

"Ai do think, sir, that a cruisah of the ah . . . countah class ought to hev new gear before some . . . er . . . *foreigner*."

That word "foreigner," as Voles used it, represented another gulf between the Captain and the Lieutenant-Commander. Voles, product of the newer schools of nationalism, used the word as a term of abuse. Owbridge, product of the old school of patriotism, could use the words "dago" and "froggy" as affectionate nicknames.

"What is it this time, Voles?"

"Type 998, sir. They've actually fitted it to that Agrarian corvette. It's quait fentestic. The latest thing we've got is a 276 and very troublesome it is too. Ai never get a moment's peace with it." Mr. Voles sounded exactly like an ailing mother complaining over a fractious child.

Captain Owbridge touched a bell at his side and in a moment the door was opened and a very pretty girl in the uniform of a W.R.N.S. officer came in, smiling.

"Betty? What do you know about Type 998?"

"Never heard of it, sir."

"Well, look on the files, girl, look on the files."

"Aye, aye, sir, but it's a waste of time. I know . . ."

Captain Owbridge waved a dismissive hand, and then passed it a shade wearily through his sparse and greying hair. The two officers sat in mutually hostile silence. The Captain pushed a box of cigarettes towards his junior, and Voles lit one and let it hang from the corner of his mouth in a way which Owbridge could not like. Presently the Captain's secretary appeared.

"Nothing, sir."

"Odd. Ask Lieutenant Cohen to give me a moment."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Lieutenant Cohen came in briskly, small, hard, wiry, dark, with brilliant eyes like polished berries, and a sort of watchful, you-can't-fool-me manner.

"You wanted me, sir?"

"What about Type 998, Cohen?"

"Nine-nine-eight?"

More watchful than ever, the technical Chief of Staff hesitated, being in exactly the same difficulty as every other technician: new gear was coming in almost hourly, it was not possible to study all of it, nor to keep pace with the relevant Confidential Admiralty Fleet Orders which poured in floods from the press. Cohen, in this contingency, had found it wise to impose upon his racial exuberance, his desire to please, to agree, a Scottish caution, something of the spirit of the Glasgow which was his native city.

"Yes, 998," Voles said, rather curtly and peevishly.

"Frankly, sir, nothing."

"How's that?"

The other, however trim in his well-cut uniform, did not contrive to look like a naval officer, and at that question his shrug was even less sailorly.

"There are so many, sir."

"I know, I know. It seems . . ." Owbridge retold Voles' story, Cohen listening with sharp and nervous attention.

"Perhaps they were fitted by London from the Director of Naval Research's own office?" he suggested.

"I don't think a lot of their manners, then."

"No, sir. Shall I see what I can find out?"

"Do it discreetly, then. I don't want to make a row about it."

Lieutenant Cohen left the room and Captain Owbridge turned to Voles.

"There it is, Voles. Can't do any more. You'd better keep in touch with Cohen."

The Captain's phone was ringing, and dismissing Voles with a wave of the hand, he took up the receiver. He was not a man to chat on the telephone. He announced his name and office, acknowledged that of his caller and listened. After ringing off he sat for a moment frowning with annoyance and then rang for his secretary.

"Get hold of Lieutenant Green for me, will you?"

6

WHEN S.R.O.'s signal was received aboard Sylvester's ship, that officer was playing darts and drinking gin in the ward room. He opened the signal carelessly, read it, and flushed.

"Cripes!" he said.

"A bottle?" inquired his opponent, Surgeon-Lieutenant Mordaunt, who had just been posted to the Far East and was in a gloomy and pessimistic mood.

"From S.R.O. Wants to see me at once. He must be on to us. . . . Hell! What do they do to you when you're cashiered?"

"I don't think they cashier Naval officers, they just send 'em to the Far East, or shoot 'em. Like Byng. To encourage the others."

Sylvester swallowed his gin, found his cap and went up on deck. Aboard their neighbor, the *Agraria*, a group of Agrarian ratings inspected the new antenna with the stolid indifference of their kind. They were peasants, or lake fishermen, following, when not doing their military service, a primitive craft in a primitive way, and, unlike their flighty cousins of the towns, not readily impressed by new gadgets.

Captain Owbridge did not keep his subordinate waiting, but came to the door of his office to call him in. His manner instantly relieved that guilty man of his anxiety. He came smartly to attention, and the Captain acknowledged the salute with a smile and a hand.

"Come in, Green. News for you. Don't know how you'll like it. Hope you're not one of those who expect to be demobbed tomorrow now the boche is beaten. Sit down. Smoke if you like."

Sylvester sat down rather heavily. No bottle. But a posting to the Far East, for sure. Well, at least he would see the world. He waited, deflated by relief, for his orders.

"Speak any foreign languages?"

"Lord, no, sir!" Sylvester exclaimed, as if the Captain had accused him of nameless vices. He was, after all, of Voles' generation.

"Well, there it is. You're to be seconded to that Agrarian corvette. A signal has been made to your Captain. The corvette is carrying their President, so you'll have to mind your p's and q's. We're expected to be diplomats on occasion, you know, eh? They've fitted her with 271 and also 998, and they want an officer to take charge for a few weeks, teach the chaps to use it, and all that. Know Type 998?"

Was this, Sylvester wondered, an elaborate *revanche*, a concealed *bottle*, after all? He dismissed the idea, but was

plunged deep in confusion and despair. Had he known any Greek he would have been thinking of *hubris* and *atê*. The theme was almost Sophoclean. He had enough presence of mind to mutter:

"Heard of it, sir."

"Good man. More than I had. Don't know how you chaps keep up. By the way, you won't be with the ship for long. Just a week or two to give her people the hang of the gear. She's calling at Lisbon on the way home, and you will leave her there. Report to the British authorities and you'll be flown home. Then we shall have to see what can be done about a spot of leave."

Presence of mind is not always an advantage. Had Sylvester been shocked into blurting out that 998 was his own invention, there would have been trouble, but he would not have been faced with the prospect of operating an imaginary device, and teaching a bunch of Agrarian farmhands to do likewise.

"D'you know anything about Agraria?" the Captain was asking.

"Afraid not, sir."

"They make optical stuff, dairy produce . . . that sort of thing. Like the Swiss. Quiet, decent people. President's a Doctor Schmidt, business I fancy, or farming . . . both perhaps. Ask my secretary . . . her father had something to do with the place at one time. All right, report to the Captain of the *Agraria* at sixteen hundred hours, she sails at midnight, so send your gear aboard at once. And mind your manners."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Outside Sylvester found Betty, the Captain's secretary; they were old friends. He said:

"For the love of God come out and have lunch with me!"

She looked at him suspiciously.

"You won't propose again?"

"No, no, it's all right, I'm sober."

They went out together, the C.P.O., W.R.N.S. remarking to her male opposite number, with more than a touch of sarcasm, that they made a handsome couple.

7

LADY BETTY SINGLETON was an exceptionally pretty girl, with a square chin and large, grey eyes. She was the daughter of the newest earl, but she was rather a snob and regarded her father as a vulgar parvenu, rarely referred to her family, and took Captain Owbridge as her ideal man.

Sylvester was saying, as they walked, "The skipper says you know all about Agraria. It seems I'm seconded to their navy. So . . ."

"I see."

It was a fact that Lady Betty knew a good deal about that country, her father having once tried to wrest control of its finances from an American rival and Lady Betty having taken a forced interest in the venture. She had accompanied her father to the capital, Scröm, although she was then barely seventeen. She was her father's heiress and he expected her to take an interest in his business; but she took little pleasure in her elevated situation, and in an expansive moment had once confided to Sylvester, "You

can't think how tiresome it is, when one is in society, absolutely surrounded by people who turn out to be novelists, to be an earl's daughter without the proper attributes! We have all the money in the world, but no seat, father doesn't drink, my mother's never taken a lover, and all my brothers and cousins are sexually normal. The fact is that ever since father got made an earl for keeping old Flanders out of prison, we have been a flop."

"Flanders? Prison?"

"Surely you know about that? Of course, father was a Viscount already, naturally, as the owner of a national newspaper. They always are, I think; it's a sort of rule. Anyway, he was, and then, just as he'd managed to shove old Flanders into the Premiership, the silly old man did some jiggery-pokery with the books of some of his companies, and father lent him half a million to put his books in order. Hence our promotion."

"Good God! Did your father get his money back?"

"Yes. They gave him a contract to build a battleship."

The couple had reached the restaurant where they were to eat, and Sylvester followed the neat figure of Lady Betty to a corner table. He was thoughtful and anxious, and when their meal was served he ate with such poor appetite, and so absently, and said so little, that it was Betty who had to introduce the subject of Agraria.

"Don't you want to hear about Agraria?"

"Agraria?" he said, vaguely, and then, with violence, "Oh to hell with Agraria!"

"Oh! I gather you would rather not go. It's quite a nice little country."

"I only have to go as far as Lisbon with the ship." He looked at her with something of the desperate hope of a drowning man who perceives a straw, and entertained the notion of confiding his case to her: she was knowledge-

able and trustworthy. A creature of simple impulses, good or bad, he allowed himself no time to weigh the wisdom of the idea, but rather seized upon it as a source of relief. In a low, hurried voice, he told her the story of the joke and its consequences.

Lady Betty laughed, and went on laughing until several people at neighboring tables turned to stare. The joke was calculated to appeal to her with particular force; she loved all that punctured the inflated solemnities of authority, unless the authority was her own. Here was what might make fools of her father's friends, make nonsense of what her father represented. Little did she realize that it was her very likeness to her father which was making her relish with so much delight Sylvester's joke and the prospect of its consequences. Lord Singleton, that strong-minded nobleman, had been likened by a disgruntled Communist speaker to a "mischievous, ill-conditioned, malicious schoolboy." It was unfair: Lord Singleton might fairly be attacked as mischievous, but he was never malicious, and to call him so was to weaken a strong case. Lady Betty had all her father's high spirits.

"If I tell the Pascha," Sylvester was saying—Pascha was a term he had picked up from a French naval officer of his acquaintance—"there'll be the Devil to pay. I've left it too late. I daren't."

Lady Betty was not attending, but was running over her memories of Dr. Schmidt. That able statesman had, she recalled, pinched her bottom when she was seventeen, an excellent augury. She had, with the aplomb of her generation and the powerful swing of a hockey-forward, smacked his face, and that in his own study, from which he governed his country, and to which he had taken her to show her a valuable manuscript of St. Paul's epistle to the Romans, for the President was an ardent and pious

collector of religious documents. She recalled that the old satyr had grinned, quite unabashed, and bearing no malice, which was an even better augury, for clearly he was a man who could be relied on not to take up a bigoted line in any matter. An opportunist. What opportunity might he not see in this matter of Sylvester? She said:

"No, you can't tell the Captain now. Too embarrassing for him, and I won't have him embarrassed. Go to sea with the *Agraria*, seek an interview with Dr. Schmidt, and tell him the whole story. Throw yourself on his mercy."

"Schmidt?"

"The President of *Agraria*."

"You know him?"

"Of old. He's all right."

"Are you sure? I mean surely he'll be absolutely livid, and there'll be an international incident. God! What a mess. I'll never touch whisky again."

"Don't be childish. There is no mess. Do what I tell you and you'll be all right."

Lady Betty spoke with such authority that Sylvester felt something of the relief of shedding a burden which a devout Catholic must feel after receiving absolution for having inadvertently eaten a steak and chips in Lent. He was ready to perform the prescribed penance in the confidence of an ordained forgiveness.

8

WHEN Lady Betty returned to her office she found J. Agar Simes seated in the visitor's chair, reading one of his own articles with great satisfaction. He had learned very little from Lieutenant-Commander Voles, but he did not allow that to worry him, for clearly that genteel officer knew nothing: Simes never resented ignorance, but only resistance to his inquisition.

"Ah," he said, rising as the W.R.N.S. officer came in, "my dear Lady Betty! So nice to see you. I was in your territory so I thought I should look you up."

"Hallo, Simes," throwing her hat on to its peg with the easy accuracy of a netball champion, "what evil are you up to? How's my father?"

"He was well when I left London. Worried, of course. He takes his great responsibilities so seriously, which is only right, but it is a heavy burden, a heavy burden."

"Father? Don't be an ass, Simes!"

The injunction made no impression: with his employer and his employer's daughter, Simes had a fixed policy of behaving like an old family retainer, a perfect gem of a butler, and nothing would shake him from this attitude. He was neither a cynic nor a sceptic: for the sake of his dignity, which he had lately come to value all the more for having, in the past, sacrificed it to his success, it was necessary that Lord Singleton and his daughter should possess certain qualities of character: and it followed that they *did* possess them, and any apparent departure from

standards of behavior demanded by these qualities was put down to the pleasant eccentricity of the great.

"What are you after, up here?" Lady Betty inquired.

"The story of bringing in the last submarines."

"Get it?"

"Naturally."

"Nothing else?"

"Oh, I shall take the opportunity to interview President Schmidt of Agraria. He is returning to his ship to-day. In fact, I ought to be off now." Mr. Simes rose and began to work himself into his vast overcoat.

"Give the President my regards."

"You know him?"

"We met some years ago. His ship has been fitted with one of our radar sets."

"Two," said Simes, "two. There is a 998 as well."

"I didn't think you'd know about that."

"Why not?"

"Top secret."

"I happened to notice the rather curious aerial."

"And, of course, knew what set it belonged to?"

Very gently and indifferently Mr. Simes shrugged, as if to imply that her question was merely foolish.

"I am acquainted with the principal types of radar," he said.

"I'm sure you are," Betty agreed, and added, she hardly knew why, "What's that got to do with it?"

"Eh?"

"I talk too much," she said, and managed to appear much mortified. "I must really get on with my work, so I'm going to throw you out."

She took the cover off her typewriter. Mr. Simes looked long at her bent and glossy head, decided he would get no more from her and took his leave.

As Simes walked through the dockyard, making detours round vast piles of packing cases, avoiding immense peripatetic cranes, deafened by the magnified woodpecker hammering of riveters, distracted by the general uproar of this enormous *al fresco* factory, he considered what he had heard. So, then, 998 was *not* a new radar type. In that case, what was it? He had heard . . . but what had he *not* heard? Tales of rays to stop aircraft engines; of death rays; of rays causing some frightful form of dermatitis; of rays to disorder the brain; in short, of devices from the pages of a schoolboy's penny dreadful, which might, however, be real, true. During some moments of unwonted humility, of a cold fear induced by the fact that, as a journalist, he knew, what the layman did not, exactly how ignorant he was of the progress of killing machines . . . during some horrible moments Simes admitted to himself that it was no longer possible to make a common-sense judgment of what was and what was not possible to science. In the shadow of each leading politician Simes seemed to see lurking the diabolical figure, half ape, half god, of some enigmatic physicist or biochemist, like the silent and dreadful familiar of a witch. If some such savant declared that he could disintegrate London, or turn the population of Russia into stone, like the head of Medusa the Gorgon, how could one know whether this was or was not true? How could the most able and conscientious statesman steer a safe course among such mysterious perils? He could not: he was bound to accept at face value the most outrageous and shocking claims, and thereafter to act accordingly. The whole race of ordinary men, the frightened journalist told himself, these bustling ratings with their cheerful faces and lively backchat, these fitters and welders repairing a battle cruiser, these elegant and seaman-like officers, were once again at the dubious

mercy of a class of witch doctors, druids, sachems whose knowledge was esoteric and whose power was not yet measured. The age of reason was gone by, leaving, as a legacy, a new age of humble and terrified Faith in the face of a gigantic and devilish monster of indifference.

Mr. Simes shuddered, flung off that evil thought. He must not lose himself in such unprofitable and gloomy metaphysics: he must concentrate on what was immediate, for example upon his coming interview with the Agrarian President. There was a man whose common sense and humanity was not to be shaken by the silent threats of the scientific fiends.

Mr. Simes was expected: the Captain of the *Agraria*, a man with a simple and passionate admiration for the organs of democracy, was well aware of what was due to a newspaper with three or four million circulation, and as the great journalist went up the gangway, the side was piped as if he had been a foreign admiral. With great *savoir-faire* Mr. Simes stood for a moment at attention, removed his hat, and kept his eyes on the Agrarian flag. Then he stepped on to the deck, and the Captain came forward to greet him.

"De President is ready to receive you, sir."

"Then we must not keep his Excellency waiting."

They shook hands, and passed through the ranks of fresh-faced, brown-eyed fishermen, and so below to the ship's ward room, now doing duty as the Presidential salon. Dr. Schmidt, majestic and tubular as a Victorian railway shark in his frock coat, was standing by the table, one hand on his despatch case, the other fingering his lapel.

"Ah, Mr. Simes, come in, sir, come in. How do you do? No, no, don't leave us, Captain."

"It is very good of Your Excellency to receive me,"

Simes said, albeit a shade condescendingly, for he was accustomed to be well received in the most exalted circles, and with deference.

"Not at all, sir, not at all. None of us can do without the Press, and in the person of yourself, it has rights which must be conceded."

Mr. Simes bowed, the President bowed, the Captain bowed. A steward entered, offering Agrarian brandy, Agrarian absinthe. Presently Mr. Simes began to ask questions and to make notes of the answers.

Dr. Schmidt was, like so many of his countrymen, connected by birth with both agriculture and industry. His father had left him a prosperous dairy farm in the Agrarian Alps, and from his mother he had inherited shares in one of the great optical works for which Agraria is famous, which made microscopes and refractometers, and also the world-renowned Klauff-Dombitz camera.

Dr. Schmidt had not been interested in politics as a young man, but had, like other businessmen, come to the aid of his country in a time of crisis, and once having become President and Prime Minister, found it expedient to remain in that office, where he was not unpopular. He had entered politics when the rising spirit of bolshevism among the factory hands and peasants had been causing alarm in sound business circles, offering himself as candidate to the workers and peasants, with a practical policy of higher wages and shorter hours, with double pay for overtime. He was elected. His whole mind was given to preventing, at all costs, outbreaks of those rude industrial disputes, strikes and lock-outs, which marred the peace of Agraria's neighbors in Europe, and from which thousands of wealthy tourists flocked annually to Agraria. He raised industrial wages by fifteen per cent, and the price of farm produce by sixteen per cent, thus placing, in that odd one

per cent, a bone of contention between town and country. He spread the income tax over the whole population, and with the greatly increased revenue thus obtained, subsidized the hotels, restaurants and the Agrarian Airline so effectively as seriously to alarm the Swiss Government. Everybody had then had a rise of income, and if they found themselves, with the exception of the businessmen who collected the subsidies, with less money than ever, they could not deny that they had had increases, and that their pastors were right in attributing their poverty to their own habits of dissipation and idleness, for hardly any of the peasants worked more than fourteen hours a day and the factory hands barely ten; and to the extravagance of their wives who were no longer willing to knit their own woollen stockings, from the fleeces of their mountainy sheep.

The Government of Dr. Schmidt had proved so successful that it was returned to power in the General Election of 1939, and Dr. Schmidt had steered the country through the war years with a clear eye and a steady hand. Range-finders and such gear were manufactured for all the belligerent powers. The hospitality of Agrarian soil was offered for international conferences of all kinds, which made up for the absence of tourists.

During the last weeks of the war in Europe, Dr. Schmidt called a special meeting of his Cabinet. He informed his Ministers that he had reason to believe that the Western Powers would soon be forming another League of Nations, to which even the Soviet powers might adhere. He proposed that he should go to England and attempt to persuade the Western leaders to make Agraria the seat of the new League. "The Swiss," he said, "had their turn last time, and very profitable it was. Now it is our turn."

The British Government had offered, as a gesture of

goodwill, to fit the Agrarian Navy with radar apparatus, and it was therefore decided that the President be conveyed to London in the single unit of that force, a corvette purchased from the British for the purpose of suppressing smuggling and Albanian piracy in Lake Prontis. The warning of two submarines across the course of the *Agraria*, the commanders of which were perhaps not yet apprised of the collapse and defeat of their nation, had caused the ship to be diverted to Rosyth, an accident which introduced the flag of Agraria to Sylvester Green in the manner already described.

This, then, was the Dr. Schmidt whom Agar Simes was interviewing.

"I see," the journalist said, putting away his notebook with a gesture sufficiently ostentatious to imply that whatever followed would be strictly off the record, "I see we have fitted you with 998. It is a remarkably fine tribute to the confidential friendship which exists between our government and your own, sir."

Swiftly, under cover of a hand raised to adjust his spectacles, Dr. Schmidt glanced with lifted eyebrows at his Captain: gently, hardly perceptibly that officer shrugged. Dr. Schmidt, with a new note of slight reserve, said:

"Yes, indeed."

Mr. Simes did not insist: clearly, the old boy would not talk. He said:

"Lady Betty Singleton asked to be remembered to Your Excellency."

"Indeed? Very charming. You will convey my respects to her? It is many years since we met. A young woman of character . . ." The President's hand stole to his cheek and he smiled reminiscently, and on this pleasant note of friendly gossip these two eminent men parted. As he went ashore Simes' brain was working as hard as a donkey

engine. It was clear to him that there was something going forward of which he knew absolutely nothing, and he was extremely angry. Here was an Agrarian ship fitted with our newest and most secret weapon; from this it followed that there must be a very close bond between the British and Agrarian Governments. What was it? Why had he not been told? And what was 998? It was outrageous that he should be kept in ignorance, and certainly none of the Conservative Ministers would have been guilty of the gross blunder of failing to confide in him. The fault must be with one of these Labor fellows, with their benevolent contempt for public opinion. Well, he, Simes, would deal with that in its proper place, but meanwhile what had that penny-plain and twopence-colored Republic to offer which would induce . . . ? Unless, of course, the position was reversed? Was 998 *Agrarian*? And, again, *what* was it? The Agrarian mechanics were well advanced in the science of electronics. A joint invention . . . ? In that case . . .

Mr. Simes stumbled violently over a pile of steel plates, almost pitching head first into the water of the basin. He pulled himself together and postponed his thinking until he should be in his aeroplane, with the final reflection that it must, after all, have been a mission of importance which brought the President, in person, from Agraria.

9

MEANWHILE Lieutenant Cohen, Owbridge's technical chief-of-staff, had been making his discreet inquiries. The telephone being an instrument hostile to discretion, he decided to call in person at the headquarters of the Radar Branch, which was housed in a fine old mansion in Surrey. The spacious grounds and woods of the house were crowded with Nissen huts, like great, ugly fungi, monstrous parasites battenning upon the ancient trees.

It might be supposed that any branch of the Royal Navy must, in the course of nature, be of the same substance as the trunk: but branches not only grow from the parent member, they can be grafted on to it. And it sometimes happens that there grows from the junction of graft and scion a shoot intermediate in nature between the two, a chimera. Such was Lieutenant Cohen's branch of the navy, an uneasy compromise between the naval and the scientific disciplines.

The house was known simply as the Mansion, and contained the administrative offices, the laboratories and workshops being in the Nissen huts. The whole place seethed with the animation of its immense staff and the coming and going of transport. W.R.N.S. officers hurried about the grounds carrying papers; and leave-warrants, pay cheques, ration cards fell from the hands of these beneficent young women, like autumn leaves falling from the trees of Vallombrosa, or for that matter Hyde Park. Officers and ratings thrown, by the chances of war, into this place, at once recognized what they had been looking

for: this was paradise. Gone was that machine-like perfection of discipline which, aboard their ships or in barracks, kept them "fast bound in misery and iron." Here, as they wandered among the trees and shrubberies, they would meet an old shipmate who had come to the Mansion, ostensibly for a day, invented a new department, acquired a staff, furniture, stationery; was installed, promoted, respected. And might they not expect to do likewise?

In this busy and happy center of maritime warfare Lieutenant Cohen sought one Steven-Blair, D.Sc. He found him on the third floor of the Mansion, in an office ten feet square which he had to himself.

"Hallo, Steve," Cohen greeted his old friend, "I see you're on your way up."

"Yes, Ike, I am. Elphinstone is still on the fourth floor and has to share an office with a female crystallographer from Cambridge, with buck teeth. I believe I may get to the second floor before the Jap war ends."

"Really? Well done!"

"I think it's possible. I don't want to boast, but after all, Broth-Elkington's there, and he never did anything at the Cavendish except break thermometers. He's a Post-Captain now. Of course, his wife's cousin's an under-secretary, but on the other hand I *do* know some arithmetic."

The two men laughed together, and offered each other cigarettes and enjoyed that warm feeling of being really in the know about how the war had been won.

Steven-Blair was amphibious: as a scientist he worked ashore, generally at the Mansion house, wearing an old tweed coat and flannel trousers. But as Commander Steven-Blair he carried out trials afloat, and wore a handsome uniform.

The two young men exchanged news of college friends and Glasgow acquaintances. Presently, casually, Cohen asked:

"Did you do the 998 trials, by the way?"

"998? Let's see . . . no, I don't think so. Or, wait a bit, did I?"

The question was a difficult one, subtle and complex in its implications: in the first place Dr. Steven-Blair had done so many trials that he could not recall them all off-hand. His records would tell him, and the point was not important. But the answer he gave must take into account matters other than those of mere fact: for example, the standing of Type 998. If that were high and he admitted no knowledge of it, his own standing would suffer. Not that he minded being honest with Cohen, but Cohen might talk, you could never be sure: he had only to mention that they seemed to be giving old S-B rather secondary jobs nowadays, that the old boy hardly seemed to be in the VIP class, and immense damage might be done. He would never get to the second floor, never get a twelve-by-twelve office; he would leave the Service honorably, no doubt, but without that *éclat* which was going to be so important after the war, which was going to have a direct bearing on his status in peace time, and upon the sort of appointment he could hope for.

"998," he repeated, and pulled open a filing drawer full of typed cards which he began to flick over with his thumbnail. Once or twice he paused, frowning over a card. He was not reading it, he was gaining time, and wondering how it came about that he had no record nor memory of the set whatever. Was it significant of what he had begun to suspect, that he was being kept out of the best things, that that little twerp Broth-Elkington and his toady Elphinstone were keeping the plums to themselves?

Dr. Steven-Blair continued to frown over a card in the drawer. Lieutenant Cohen craned, but could not read. Steven-Blair closed the drawer with thoughtful deliberation.

"Sorry, old boy," he said, "I haven't a clue."

His manner did not bear out his words: it suggested, and was meant to suggest, that he had as many clues as a detective novelist.

"You mean you didn't do the trial?" Cohen insisted, with that brutal disregard for the vanities of others which is at the back of much anti-semitism.

"Simply can't tell you a thing, old boy."

"Ah."

For a moment the two officers sat in silence and some embarrassment, and then Cohen said:

"Where can I get the gen on it?"

"No idea, old boy."

"Odd," Cohen said. Steven-Blair shrugged. Cohen said:

"You're being very cagy."

The Dr.-Commander rose, dismissive, to his feet, his manner such that it suddenly seemed to evoke the pale, golden ghosts of his three rings, hovering like displaced halos about the lower sleeve of his old tweed coat, dreary and significant uniform of the new science.

"There it is, old boy. No can do. Very sorry not to be more helpful. The fact is, I rather think you'll find that this is a . . . *special case*."

Lieutenant Cohen went thoughtfully downstairs. He was unwilling to go back to his base with nothing achieved, and there was one more move open to him while he was still at the Mansion house. The establishment was, among other things, the principal radar store: to it, from all over the world, came demands from ships for everything pertaining to radar, from a screw to a complete installation.

Naval storekeeping is one of the few extant examples of a perfect system, perfect and rigid. The right form, correctly filled in and signed, has much the same effect on the ratings and officers in charge of stores, as the words *Open Sesame!* had on Ali Baba's cave. The only difficulty lay in getting the right form and the correct signatures. But Lieutenant Cohen had early mastered the art of drawing stores, and he was never without a number of blanks, which he carried in his pocket, and which had been signed in advance by his Captain. He now found a quiet corner of one of the public rooms, filled and countersigned a form in triplicate, with practiced swiftness, and presented it and himself at the counter of the stores department.

"I want a 998 for *Ross and Cromarty*" he said, as casually as if he were demanding a screwdriver.

The Petty-Officer Writer who took the demand was a man of forty without ambition, and when he was ignorant said so.

"Sorry, sir. Don't know this one. I'll have to ask my officer."

Cohen watched the man enter the glass box in which the Accounts Officer in charge of stores sat at his books. This officer, unlike his subordinate, was among those with every intention of finishing in the skin of an Admiral. Through the isolating glass Cohen watched him study the form. Presently he rose, came out of his glass den and approached the counter.

"Morning. I suppose you want this gear sent up to Rosyth?"

"Yes, please."

"Right. I suppose it's O.K.? I mean, you know what the ship's entitled to?"

"I think it's O.K. I suppose you haven't one of the sets here, that I could have a look at?"

"Not actually, no. It will be sent direct from the factory."

While Lieutenant Cohen was making his way back to Rosyth, irrevocable entries were being made in ledgers, typed on cards, copied through carbons in quintuplicate. 998 was beginning to acquire that paper existence which is more real than mere phenomenal being, and which it had hitherto lacked. Formerly, it had been like an unbaptized babe; it was without psychic reality, still in limbo, its soul existing *in potentia* only. Now it had been baptized, and entered into the community of things recorded. The papers multiplied, the references to the new apparatus likewise. It was not in any index, and that made necessary even more papers, questions, memoranda, references back, forward, sideways. The cryptogram 998 appeared for the first time on the desks of C.P.O. writers, in the filing cabinets of W.R.N.S. officers, on the tables of Admirals and Captains. Signatures, carelessly, hastily scribbled, began to appear below the cryptogram, and with each new signature the astral body of the apparatus grew, as it were, more phenomenal. Within a matter of hours 998 had acquired official status; within a matter of days its name was known to a thousand naval eyes which recorded it because it was there, but did not question it because it was not their immediate concern.

It was thus that when, a few days later, the Admiral in charge of such matters received from the Foreign Office a note of thanks for fitting the corvette *Agraria* with radar, and when, faced by the unfamiliar figures 998, he asked what it was . . . it was thus that some kind of answer was forthcoming. By that time 998 existed on several hundred pieces of paper.

The Admiral was the first to question that figure, for a very good reason: he had arrived, he could get no higher,

he was in much the same case as a successful shopkeeper who has made his million and bought his peerage and can afford, at last, to be perfectly honest. Moreover, he was a sailor with a fine record: ships and men were his trade, not electrical gadgets, and he had no objection in the world to show his ignorance of devices which he treated with the indulgent tolerance of a parent for a child's mechanical toys.

But the men whom the Admiral questioned were by no means in the same case: they belonged to the generation which was forced to reckon with all these new engines. They were still up and coming, keeping a sharp eye on their dearest friends in case they might be getting ahead.

"What," said the Admiral, "is 998?"

"Let's see," said a Captain, "that's the new treble magnetron thing, isn't it?"

"Would you like me to get the handbook, sir?" asked a young Commander, mischievously, for the Admiral's distaste for such technicalities was notorious.

But both of them looked for the real answer towards a little, grey, anxious-looking civilian, the other occupant of the room at that moment. The Admiral was saying:

"998. Tell you the truth, I've never heard of it."

That was nothing, nobody minded that; the Admiral was not the man to know every radar set in existence. But what were the amazement and consternation, the disbelief, doubt and questioning, when the small, grey man in the corner, aware that something was expected of him, echoed the Admiral:

"Neither have I."

Suppose, for a moment, a scene in the Vatican. The Pope, secure in particular admissions of ignorance, because of a general omniscience, has laughingly confessed that he has never heard of some Saint, just now evoked by

his two favorite and most trusted Cardinals. All three, then, turn to the Pope's chaplain, a man greatly honored, and respected above all others for his profound hagiology. They turn to him expecting a succinct account of the life and martyrdom of the saint in question. And what they get is a downright admission that the expert, like his holy patron, has never heard of the fellow. What thoughts pass swiftly through the minds of the Cardinals? If this scholar has never heard of the saint, then they must immediately wonder whether the saint existed. And if not, what of all those shrines, all those feast-days? Meanwhile, the Pope, watchful but indulgent, waits.

The little, grey man who, by a mere admission of ignorance, could cause such consternation, was a university don. In the past, no doubt, the phrase would have evoked the image of a man of culture and learning, piety and responsibility, playing a beneficent role in the moral and intellectual guidance of his country. The Admiral's don was not like that. He was a clever mathematician and an able mechanic delighted to find himself, because of the war, treated not discourteously by Cabinet Ministers who had been builders' laborers or steel tycoons and had turned to political office as less fatiguing. The Admiral's scientific familiar was, in short, a fair sample of the new learning, of the physicists who fawn about Demos for the honor of destroying him, having thrown overboard every principle of philosophic integrity for the enormous, the incomparable, the ultimate privilege of being called *patriots*.

However, in what appertained to his learning, this worthy mechanic was honest enough. And however little significance the Admiral's admission of ignorance might have, the scientist's muttered yet definite, *Neither I, might*, if the effect were anything to go by, have been thundered through the Admiralty offices in a voice of doom-laden

prophecy. The Admiral, at that mutter, was thunderstruck, the two naval officers of his staff paralyzed with astonishment.

"Oh, come, sir!" said the senior of these, as soon as he could get back his breath.

"But I haven't," the little grey man insisted, plaintively, "I haven't. Never. You did say 998? I thought so. Well, to the best of my knowledge, *there is no such set.*"

Thereafter came a sort of quiet uproar, a suppressed panic. Searched files yielded up, here and there, the troublesome cryptogram, yet the department responsible for the secret and technical handbooks knew nothing of it. The thing, the Admiral suggested, must be a R.A.F. set which, by some muddle on the railway, had been mistakenly delivered to the *Agraria*. But neither the Army nor the R.A.F. knew anything of 998.

Slowly and with difficulty the thin and ephemeral trail of that group of digits was followed by skilled auditors who could find their way through the books and papers of the stores department until, some six hours from the first beginning of doubt, it led to Captain Owbridge, Lieutenant-Commander Voles, and Lieutenant Cohen.

The two junior officers were then summoned to London. Lieutenant Cohen, with the practiced dexterity of a man trained in a great research institution, deftly extricated himself, throwing the weight of the affair on to the cruiser's man. He, Cohen, had merely done what he was told: Voles was the one who knew, who had actually seen Type 998.

"*Seen it!*" the Admiral turned sharply on Voles, startled out of his dawning belief that the wretched device had no existence.

"Yes, sir. That is, the aerial; all the external parts."

The examination of the Lieutenant-Commander was

undertaken by the little grey don. An exact observer, and long convinced that whatever happened to him was very important indeed, Voles gave answers calculated to establish his reputation for efficiency, for conciseness. He was so glib that even a junior barrister would have suspected his evidence, but the physicist did not. Voles sketched that grotesque antenna, estimated, with remarkable readiness, the diameter of the "wave-guides." The don made notes and the Admiral yawned. Finally Voles was thanked, congratulated, and dismissed. He had not even mentioned Sylvester.

"Well?" said the Admiral.

"I can only conclude," replied his familiar, "that the thing is something of their own."

"Important?"

"Very important indeed."

"How d'ye make that out?"

The scientist smiled deprecatingly. He said:

"I don't want to blind you with science. You heard him talk of wave-guides?"

"I did. Heard the words before. Might as well be Arabic."

"With very high frequencies we cannot use cable feeders, owing to what we call capacity losses. We use pipes instead. The power is made to flow through them, like water. The internal dimension of those pipes is a function of the frequency of the transmitter. If Voles' estimate is near correct then . . ."

"Then what?"

"Then they're ahead of us. Years ahead. They've solved problems still holding us up. And if them, who else? The internal dimension of the hollow-cavity of the magnetron, loaded with—"

"Ah, well . . ." the Admiral interrupted. "Well, all right, you'd better leave this in my hands now. I'll see if I can get you any more to go on."

IO

AFTER Admiral St. Just had politely rid himself of his scientific familiar, he appeared thoughtful. He was a man of long and distinguished service, in the course of which, like other senior naval officers, he had frequently undertaken roles more diplomatic than military. He knew as much of foreign relations as of navigation, and he understood that in his present predicament he must have advice. He had little acquaintance among the new generation of Foreign Office men, but he had recently met, at a sherry party, a cousin of his wife's, a man named Lassen who was firmly established in some high position at the Foreign Office; so firmly, indeed, the Admiral recalled, that not even his unconcealed loyalty to the late Neville Chamberlain had seriously weakened him.

Sir Lewis Lassen was, as it were, successful in spite of himself: he had none of the attributes called for by the times: he was not an opportunist, but a man of convictions, who lived up to them. He had obstinately opposed the war policy of bombing enemy cities, on the grounds that it was a waste of time and money. He disliked industrialists and trade union bosses and scientific pundits. He read Plato. Public abuse and private congratulation left him

equally indifferent, and he cared not whether he was loved or hated, so long as he was powerful.

When Admiral St. Just's name was sent in to him, Sir Lewis was engaged with Agar Simes, the only journalist he ever received. Proud, cold and reserved, he had at one time tried to dispense with the goodwill of the Press. He recalled without bitterness, what he had learned with contempt, that it could not be done. The hostility of editors, he admitted, had set him back: politicians, even his own chiefs, were afraid of his name. And so, looking about for a representative of the Fourth Estate with whom to make a treaty of mutual aid, he had lit upon Simes.

Between Sir Lewis Lassen and J.A.S. the columnist, baiter of the great and flatterer of the little, exploiter of every American trick of words which might serve to emphasize his common-manhood, there could be no treaty. But J. Agar Simes the Special Correspondent was quite another matter: not for nothing had that hard-working journalist got himself elected to the Travelers Club where, quiet and retiring, he had taught himself a second code of manners and behavior for special occasions, for Lassen occasions, by watching those of his fellow members who had been born, so to speak, *arrived*. And it was by means of these manners that he was now, not for the first time, impressing Sir Lewis with his proper regard for political values.

"This victory," he was saying, "we must watch its aftermath. There must be no stampeding of the men who understand international affairs, by mob hysteria. All this mutual congratulation, mutual admiration, British, Russian, French, American . . . dangerous, very dangerous. It's the illusion that friendship is a product of alliance. It looks as if we, of the Press, have a job to do, helping yourselves. Distrust is the only safe foundation on which

your department can build, and it will be our work to create it."

Sir Lewis listened with tolerant approval. He was a man whose appearance was calculated to advance him with his own shrinking and vanishing class: thin-faced, high-nosed, cold-eyed, elegant. It was by no means the appearance required for notoriety, for apparent success: his dry, and rather sour sense of humor, had led him to decorate the walls of his room with portraits of the men who had the kind of head the times demanded. From those walls the Boss head, the massive, ponderous, coarse masks of Stalin, Churchill, John L. Lewis, Göring, Bevin, lowered down as if in triumph over the thin-faced, long-headed men, over Lassen. He was not concerned at their triumph, bought with public rantings, publicly displayed tears and laughter. Lassen was all right: he ruled.

He was about to make some answer to Simes when a messenger came in and handed him a card. He read it.

"Admiral St. Just," he said, aloud.

"Shall I go?" Simes asked.

"No, no. Stay and meet the Admiral." It was by such small services that Sir Lewis paid for his friend's support.

The Admiral, disconcerted to find the journalist with Sir Lewis, hesitated at the door.

"Didn't mean to interrupt . . ."

"My dear St. Just!" Sir Lewis stood up, introduced Mr. Simes, "I was telling Simes he must meet you. What can I do for you?"

"I wanted some advice, Lassen, but . . ." with characteristic frankness he looked at Simes.

"Simes," Lassen said, "knows more secrets than the Inner Cabinet." He spoke with cold finality: it amused him to impose his somewhat vulgar crony upon men of his own kind.

"In that case of course . . ." The Admiral sat down, but he was not at ease. He did not approve of the policy of admitting the Press to every council and relying upon their discretion. Had this Simes been Editor of *The Times*, it might have been well enough. As it was, the creature was one of the loud howlers of the popular Press, which great institution the Admiral regarded as a principal cause of the decay of national manners, morals and taste.

With an effort, St. Just told a version of the tale of 998 which exposed his needs without putting Admiralty in a bad light. Lassen listened impassively, Simes eagerly, and it was the latter who burst into speech as soon as the Admiral had fallen silent.

"But Type 998 isn't a radar set at all!"

Together in deprecating exclamatory speech, Sir Lewis and St. Just looked at him coldly. The Admiral flushed darkly, swallowed, and said:

"Perhaps you will explain?"

"Certainly. It was clear to me when I was up there that your people at Forth Command were on to something. It was from hints I got up there, perhaps unwitting hints, that I was led to . . . well, not exactly question President Schmidt, but, well, I hope I know my job, and we're on pretty good terms."

"Indeed," Lassen put in before the Admiral could say anything, "and what did the President tell you, Simes?"

"In so many words, nothing at all. I gathered . . . it's my sorry trade you know . . . that the thing is absolutely secret, brand new, and *not* a radar set."

"Then what the devil is it?" the Admiral asked, sulkily, his sense of duty overcoming his disinclination for getting information about his own service, his own department, from a blasted reporter.

"God knows, my dear Admiral. Might be anything.

These scientific birds are turning out new horrors daily. Schmidt's own firm is the *Agrarelekticitätsgesellschaft*. They've been making radios for the Russians. Then there's his *Agraroptikongesellschaft*. Believe me, the Agrarians are nobody's fool when it comes to electronics. And then, you realize the Yanks are mixed up in this? You see, the National Bank of Agraria, and the *Agrarcoöp* are really . . ."

With zest, fluency and pleasure Mr. Simes plunged into an exposition of the industrial, financial and social organization of the Agrarian State. But the Admiral was hardly listening. He was recalling a memorandum which he had seen on his desk, seen yet not noted, in which, among other items, was the confirmation that Lieutenant Sylvester Green, R.N.V.R. (S), had been seconded to the Agrarian Navy as Radar-Liaison Officer aboard the Agrarian Ship, *Agraria*.

II

SYLVESTER was, indeed, where his papers declared him to be, and at the moment when his name presented itself to Admiral St. Just as the key which might open this mystery of 998, he was standing just within the door of President Schmidt's cabin asking, diffidently, and with a horrible consciousness of the nature of the disclosures he was about to make:

"Could I see you for a moment, sir?"

"Of course, Lieutenant, of course!" Dr. Schmidt looked up from the balance-sheet he was studying, beamed, waved hospitably towards a chair.

"Shut the door, take a seat, and go ahead."

Sylvester would have preferred to stand: he was putting himself on the carpet, and it would not be fitting, he would be showing insufficient consciousness of his sin, if he sat down. So he sat at attention.

"I . . ." he began. Dr. Schmidt smiled at him encouragingly. He liked the youth. Sylvester said:

"The ship's radar . . ."

"Ah, yes. The Captain tells me it is working well. He is delighted with it. And with you."

"Thank you, sir. The 271's all right. It was . . . the other . . ."

"So, so, there were two. I recall, now. This other, then . . . ?"

"Sir, there's . . . there is no such set."

His Excellency sat back in his chair and surveyed his English officer with astonishment.

"No such set," he said, "I do not at all understand you."

"998, sir. It's . . . imaginary."

"Himmel! What is the matter with the lad? Imaginary! Have you not shown me the antenna yourself? And then there is the locked cabin in which the set . . ."

"O, God!" Sylvester groaned, and then, almost in a breath, he poured out the whole painful story, the night in Edinburgh, the walk back through those eerie and dismal slums, the finding of the broken pram, the stealing of the pawnbroker's sign . . . everything.

"Please don't think," he concluded, "that there was anything disrespectful, I mean because your ship wasn't English or any rot of that sort. It was just that it was the only one with lights and welding gear and everything . . . it would have been the same whatever ship . . . and we were drunk, sir."

"You were drunk," Dr. Schmidt agreed. He had listened

throughout in silence to this fantastic story, but as it proceeded, his face had become increasingly congested with blood, his neck had swollen over his starched collar, and now, no longer able to contain himself, his laughter, enormous, homeric, teutonic and shattering, burst from him, first in a second, articulate repetition of those words, *You were drunk*, and then in a series of huge whoops and gurgles, which rattled the brass fittings of the deadlights, scattered the papers on the table in vast gusts of breath, and at last, absorbing Sylvester, his anxiety, remorse, fear in its Rabelaisian immensity, swept him too into yells of laughter, until the tears poured down his cheeks and he was sucking and wheezing for air.

Presently the President calmed himself, his chuckles subsiding in diminuendo, broken by occasional whoops and ending with a series of gigantic sighs. This was like a passing storm of wind, and throughout this passing his mind, cool behind his laughter, was already at work with what this ridiculous youth had told him. He asked:

"Your own people know nothing of this?"

"Lord no, sir! I shouldn't be here if they did."

"Quite so. But they must certainly discover soon?"

"Honestly, sir, I don't know. It seems absurd, impossible, but the fact is . . ."

Sylvester, with the volubility of relief, plunged into an exposition of conditions, of the torrent of new designs, the necessary semi-ignorance of a large part of the radar personnel, of the veil of secrecy, ragged in places, sound in others, of all the factors which might lead to the acceptance, at least for a while, of 998 as an authentic device.

"I see, I see." The President was grave and thoughtful, laughter forgotten.

"So," he said, "we have but to remove this joke of yours and all will be forgotten?"

"I think so, sir. May I do that?" Sylvester asked, eagerly.

For a full minute Dr. Schmidt said nothing, regarded the papers which the breath of his laughter had scattered. At last, with great deliberation, he said:

"I think not, Mr. Green. Not yet. We shall regard the retention of that . . . er . . . totem, where you can see it, as a punishment, eh? For you know you should be punished, this you must admit?"

"Yes, sir," Sylvester was crestfallen but reasonable.

"Are you likely, Mr. Green, to hear anything of this matter from England?"

"If there is anything, sir, Lady Betty Singleton, who is a friend of mine and a Wren officer, will write to me. Quite likely there may be a letter for me at Lisbon."

"Good, excellent," Dr. Schmidt was hearty, rubbing his hands. "Perhaps, in that case, you will let me know anything touching this business? Lady Betty is a friend of yours?"

Sylvester blushed and nodded.

"You are fortunate," said His Excellency, "I have known her years ago, when she was only a schoolgirl . . . *sehr hübsch, bezaubernd . . . et puis déjà aussi rusée qu'un vieux rat des coulisses!*" The President chuckled and Sylvester looked blank.

"She told me she knew you, sir."

"So? And it was on her suggestion, I think, that you made this confession?"

"Well . . . yes, sir, it was."

"Good. And now help me to gather up these papers. And then we shall have a drink together. Steward! *Deux pastis.*"

12

LADY BETTY SINGLETON had, of course, numerous ways of keeping in close touch with any event which interested her, and upon the return of Lieutenant Cohen from London she soon discovered that he came back little wiser than he went.

"There's something mysterious about the set," he told her, after reporting to Captain Owbridge, "Steven-Blair knows something I think, but he won't talk. I've put in for one for *Ross and Cromarty*, just on the off-chance. The worst we can get is a bottle. But at least we ought to be able to find out what the thing *is*."

Some days later, the officers of the cruiser *Ross and Cromarty* gave a party in their ward room, to which Lady Betty was naturally invited. She accepted the invitation the more readily in that she hoped to meet Lieutenant-Commander Voles whom she had hitherto treated with reserve, for she was aware that her Captain did not like the man. She had, to some extent, adopted the Captain's taste as her model.

Her reserve, she knew, had wounded Mr. Voles: he was wounded as a man, snubbed by a pretty woman; and as one with social aspirations, snubbed by an earl's daughter. He had been much put out by her coolness, but he was not the man to remember that, and any advance from her was sure to be met more than half-way, so that, in his eagerness to please, the radar officer would tell her anything she wanted to know.

So, at least, Betty thought, and was proved right in the event. The party was not half-an-hour old before she had Mr. Voles neatly and tightly rolled round her little finger. She danced with him twice, and she listened with such girlish eagerness to his account of how he had beaten the Engineer Commander at darts during a severe storm off Cape St. Vincent, that he quite forgot her former coolness and was ready to tell her whatever she wanted to know.

Mr. Voles had been making an unfavorable comparison between the administration of the Fleet and that of the Clemency Insurance Corporation with which he was connected. Betty said:

"How right you are! And yet, you know, there is something to be said for the poor old Admiralty. They have a kind of *flair* for the right man. For example, choosing you out of all the officers here to go to London about 998. You see what I mean?"

"Yes, I see," Voles agreed, reluctantly, as if he did not like to admit that the choice of himself in this instance had been evidence of efficiency, and yet was forced to follow the severe logic of the facts.

"Apropos," Lady Betty asked, "how did you get on?"

He told her, and she listened with her wide, admiring eyes fixed upon his face.

"It's very odd," she said, when he had finished.

"Very odd."

"What do *you* make of it?"

"I think," he said, lowering his voice and head, and speaking confidentially into her ear, "*I think it's not one of ours at all.* I think it's something of their own, and if what I saw of it is anything to go by, something very remarkable. That fellow Green, the man they seconded to the *Agraria*, was trying to put me off, of course, but I'm a

fairly downy bird. Fairly downy. It's my opinion that Admiralty have come to the same conclusion as myself."

On the following day Lady Betty went to London on leave and called on her father in his office. The earl was extremely busy, but made time to see his daughter, who had put off her uniform and was as beautifully dressed as if Paris had never been *incomunicado*. She was, indeed, clever about her clothes, making full play with the new exclusiveness, the monopoly of the rich in such once-common fabrics as silk, wool and linen. Let the shop-girls and factory wenches wear rayon and nylon and fibro and the rest: Lady Betty looked all the more remote from these poor creatures in her silks and her handsome woollen suits. She would no more have gone out in synthetic fabrics than in synthetic jewellery.

Her father she found deep in the study of the fourth lesson of a Correspondence Course in Journalism, much advertised in his own papers. Until very recently the great newspaper magnate had taken no more interest in newspaper writing than a broker intent upon making a fortune by cornering sultan's takes in plumcake. But a rival press lord, having taken to expressing his views in one of his papers with what was alleged to be his own pen, Lord Singleton had been stung into emulation. He had many natural advantages and was making good progress, for it was quite untrue, as had been claimed, that he was illiterate: he had long ago learned to sign his name, and for many years had been able to read and write words of even several syllables.

After an exchange of greetings and of family news, Lady Betty asked whether Agar Simes was in the office. The earl sent for him. Mr. Simes was busy on his J.A.S. column when summoned, and as he always dressed the part of the moment, he entered his employer's presence without his

coat, with his waistcoat unbuttoned, his eyebrows combed forward in tufts half-fierce, half-benevolent, a number of pens and pencils disposed about his person, a chewed but extinct cigar between his teeth, and a green eyeshade bound like a wreath of bay about his brow.

"Good God, Simes!" Lady Betty exclaimed.

"Hiya," said Mr. Simes, and lofted his cigar. The earl had returned to his studies, deeply interested in a chapter on Scoops.

"Look, Simes," Betty said, "this is *me*." Mr. Simes shrugged, threw the cigar into his lordship's wastepaper basket, and assumed the correct personality for dealing with a Singleton.

"I have something which will, I fancy, be of interest to you, Lady Betty," he said. "Ah, here we are . . ." he went over to the tape machine which was rapping away spasmodically in a corner, and began to run tape through his fingers from the pile on the floor. "Here it is." He passed a couple of yards of tape to Lady Betty, and she read it. It was an account of the explosion, in mid-air, above the mouth of the Tagus, of a Spanish air liner. The nearest ship to the wrecked machine had been the Agrarian warship *Agraria*. She had stood by for survivors, but there were none. Lady Betty read the account twice and then asked:

"Well?"

Mr. Simes looked excessively knowing: if he did not put his forefinger on the side of his nose, it was because no such gesture was necessary. He began to whisper. Lord Singleton looked up from his exercise book.

"Don't *whisper*," he said, peevishly, "it's really too bad! Nobody ever tells *me* anything." Lady Betty ignored her father.

"You think, then . . . ?" she said.

"Will you have lunch with me?" Mr. Simes asked quickly, with a warning glance at her father.

"Of course," she said, "provided you are correctly dressed."

"I wish you two would make less noise," the earl complained, "how can I concentrate?" He glowered at them as they left his room.

"Whispering!" he muttered, sulkily. He was no longer content to be the sharpest financial market rigger in Europe. He wanted to take part in other activities. Presently, with an air of determination, he returned to his work.

Mr. Simes and Lady Betty resumed their conversation in the restaurant of the journalist's club.

"Naturally," Simes was saying, "I gathered when I saw you up north that the thing was *theirs*, not *ours* at all. And you yourself told me that the thing was not what it appeared to be . . ." he shrugged.

"There's no deceiving *you*," Betty said dryly and looked thoughtfully at her host. He was modest:

"I have some experience."

"And so you think this explosion . . ."

". . . was an accident," he interrupted, with a quick look round the room, "but an accident of an unusual kind. Of course, the scientists have been after something of the kind for years. There is no doubt in my mind that the *Agrarelektricität* people . . ."

"*Agrarelektricität*?"

Mr. Simes explained.

After luncheon, Lady Betty went to her own club and wrote a letter to Sylvester, to go by airmail to Lisbon, at which port the *Agraria* had arrived fifteen hours late, the delay being due to her standing by to take aboard survivors from the Spanish aircraft.

Sylvester had been pacing the deck in company with the President when that doomed machine passed over their ship. They had, in fact, halted to watch it when it disintegrated before their eyes in a flash of flame, a cloud of black smoke and with a loud report.

The aeroplane had come from the heart of Spain, the Government of which nation was receiving too little credit for its masterly handling of the country's difficulties. Food being lacking for the population, the Caudillo and his ministers were engaged, very logically, in reducing the latter, by shutting up a large part of it in prison camps where, unfed, the poor prisoners died. The next of kin of some of these patriots were irrationally indignant, and it was no doubt a group of these disaffected and ungrateful persons who had put the bomb into the aircraft, which they probably mistook for the Leader's own machine. But the Spanish Public Relations Office added much to the subsequent confusion as to the origin of the accident, by indignantly denying that there existed in the whole country a single citizen capable of attempting the sacred life of the Caudillo.

Two days after the arrival of the *Agraria* in Lisbon, Sylvester, while waiting his passage home, received Betty's letter. In one particular it reassured him: those officers who had shared in the unfortunate prank were all posted to the Far East. Then the letter described its author's meeting with Simes.

Sylvester was more distressed than amused at the thickening of the plot. The more the original and simple trunk of his joke ramified, the more difficult it would be to cut it down without attracting attention. Those phenomena in the mind of Mr. Simes which began as conjectures, had a way of becoming political facts after undergoing treatment in the minds of his five or six million of readers.

As soon as Dr. Schmidt returned on board, after attending an official reception, Sylvester sought him in his cabin and showed him Lady Betty's letter. Sylvester had grown to like the President, to feel confidence in his kindness and good sense. And Dr. Schmidt had grown equally fond of his English officer, so that he was considering means of taking him to Scröm and keeping him in Agraria for a considerable time. His Excellency read the letter with attention, combing his full, black beard with his fingers and puffing out his round, red cheeks to emphasize the more striking passages. One passage, indeed, he read aloud.

"Simes believes that either by accident, or deliberately sacrificing life to test the apparatus, 998 was switched on, as the aeroplane was passing over the ship, with spectacular results."

Dr. Schmidt raised his thick eyebrows.

"This fellow takes me for an assassin, then?" He thought for some moments in silence, and then added, "We shall see."

"Can't we put a stop to all this, sir?" Sylvester pleaded, "I am willing to face the music. It was my fault."

The President shook his head, "No, my friend, we must wait a little. You owe me that, I think."

Sylvester went to his cabin and lay down upon his bunk. He was not a very imaginative young man, but he seemed to see the heavy-jowled and sinister countenances of the world's great men gathering with snarls of mutual defiance about the fantastic artifact which he had welded to the forebridge of the ship; he shrank in horror from his responsibility. Even to think of it made him tired, and his eyes drooped, his limbs relaxed. Presently he slept.

I 3

A GAR SIMES was far from being irresponsible: if he sometimes misled his public it was because the exigencies of the earl's City page, which that deft nobleman managed himself, demanded it, and Mr. Simes was nothing if he was not loyal. Or, when no question of stock, bond, commodity or currency prices was involved, Mr. Simes might see clearly, and yet realize that it would not do for the masses to do likewise.

Thus, now, his reasoning had led him to conclude that nothing concerning 998 must appear in print. He must take it to Lassen who would know what use to make of it. To test his conclusions Mr. Simes, always thorough, wrote them down on his scribbling pad, beginning with his observations of the curious antenna, listing his own subsequent inquiries, describing the ancillary evidence and so reaching his conclusion. Like the austere reasoning of Copernicus, it was wrong simply because it was based upon inadequate data. Mr. Simes did not know that: to him his notes seemed perfect, precise; premise, first, second and third terms, conclusion: a perfect syllogism which not even Socrates at his most tiresomely pertinacious could have invalidated.

Mr. Simes, his mind made up, reached for his hat, phoned for a taxi and left his office *en route* for that of Sir Lewis Lassen.

Hardly had he left it than Lord Singleton entered it. It was his lordship's habit to wander, from time to time, like Haroun al Raschid, unrecognized among his people.

He had one advantage over the great Caliph, in that he needed no disguise, for his insignificant appearance and retiring disposition resulted in his going generally unknown among the thousands who worked for him. He was a man who liked to rule from the shadows, and even his most brilliant financial coups were carried out in the name of some other and lesser man, a fact which had kept the nobleman out of prison on more than one occasion. Now, however, and for the first time, he sought to be known to the world as he was.

The earl had no special intention in calling upon Mr. Simes. He was preoccupied with a bold plan and was wandering at random. He had decided that his gratifying progress in the Correspondence Course justified him in making his debut as a journalist, and he had drifted to Mr. Simes' office with, perhaps, some idea of consulting his subordinate in the matter of a suitable topic.

Absentmindedly, the earl perceived that Simes was out of his room. He pottered about, touched with reverence the keys of the typewriter, fingered the papers on Simes' desk. Idly at first, and then with close attention, he read the scribblings upon the memorandum pad. He took it up and read them again. Very thoughtfully, he tore off the sheets and read them a third time. Then, with this document in his hand, already determined that *here* was the basis of his journalistic triumph, he went briskly back to his own office.

It was thus that the British Cabinet was informed, on the following morning, first by the front page of the earl's newspaper, which, in common with five million other people, they read with enjoyment; later by an austere-worded minute from Sir Lewis Lassen, of what was abroad in the world. Within a matter of minutes of the appearance of that news, news agencies were cabling abstracts of Lord

Singleton's disclosure to every capital in the world. A similar message was being sent by radio from the Agrarian Embassy to the President of Agraria aboard his ship, which was still moored in the Tagus.

I4

SYLVESTER was sent for to the British Embassy to be informed that he was to leave at once: a Flying Fortress, converted for diplomatic transport, was being returned to the base near Edinburgh, whence it had been seconded, so that Sylvester could be carried almost to his own port. He was to return to the ship, collect his gear, and report at the aerodrome.

He was glad of the news: he had that morning heard of Lord Singleton's debut in journalism and he had been dazed and appalled. His instinct had been to put on civilian clothes, lose himself among the crowds of Lisbon's sunny streets, make his way inland and there, in some humble occupation, hide himself for years from the consequences of his own joke. President Schmidt would not hear of him telling the truth at once.

"In any case," that statesman had explained, "it is now too late, and you would certainly not be believed. Who are you to set your word against the statesmen and newspapers of ten capitals?" And Sylvester was bound to admit that he was right.

The British Government had hastened to deny, *in toto*, all knowledge of the thoughts, plans and actions attributed to them by Lord Singleton, and as a result it was assumed, of course, that everything stated by the earl's newspaper was exactly true. As Sylvester read the things which were being written in New York and Moscow, in Paris and Peking, he did indeed realize that his voice, although it spoke the truth, would not make itself heard amidst the tremendous uproar of fifty stentors yelling their heads off. And it might be this very fact which relieved him of some part of his anxiety: it might be this which made him welcome the chance of being removed from the command of Dr. Schmidt, and of returning to his base where, he was determined, he would tell the truth.

Sylvester now realized that at an earlier stage in the history of his joke, he might, by confession, have put an end to it. This was no longer possible, the affair had passed far beyond his control. What he was now confronted with was not of his making: public opinion, stimulated by the Press, had made it. It had become the creature of whole populations, of solemn columnists who knew too little to tell the truth, too much to be silent. He had before him an admirable column by J. Agar Simes who was pointing out, most reasonably, that it was a mistake to under-rate the ability of Russian scientists; that they were quite as capable of invention as their Western fellows; that the Russian claim to possess the Agrarian ray must be taken seriously, and that the Atlantic countries must press on until they had something even better. The great columnist did not question the authenticity of the ray: why should he? Sylvester asked himself this question, and it answered itself. For men in a state of truculent fear the merest whisper of some scientific pundit—who might, for all anyone could judge, be a lunatic, since the terms in which he

worked were beyond the understanding of those for whom he worked—must absolutely be taken seriously.

Who and where is Sylvester Green? the *Daily Press* asked its readers, and Sylvester, with a groan, echoed the question. Who and where indeed? He saw himself, and how painful, how fantastic it was, through the magnifying, distorting eyes of a myriad journalists and politicians, who were thinking of him. He knew himself to be an insignificant youth of no account: they knew him as a portentous and enigmatic figure, holding in his hands, perhaps, the balance of world power. He wanted only one thing; cold, lonely, terribly afraid upon his little Tom Tiddler's ground of ludicrous Truth, he wanted to jump back into the blessed anonymity of obscurity. He shrank, trembling, from the searching, mad stare of his fellow men; he shuddered under the burden of the greatness which was being thrust upon him.

Sylvester began to feel the huge forces, the opinions of science, of the public, of the press, of politicians, reshaping him: like a *caneton à la presse* he was being crushed into a convenient, rectangular shape, his bones ground, his life blood squeezed out of him, a sauce of printers' ink poured over him, and, at last, his shapeless, soulless, meaningless carcase served up to the mob. Desperately, but with how little hope, he resisted, clung to the fading knowledge of a familiar identity.

It is probable that President Schmidt, had he been aboard the *Agraria* when Sylvester arrived to collect his gear, might have made an effort to retain him. For he had seen very clearly the several opportunities offered him by the comedy of errors recounted by Sylvester. Such an effort, however, must have failed. Sylvester, in his simplicity, had not been surprised to learn of his swift and easy passage home: *he* knew nothing of the prominent novelists,

financiers, generals, diplomats and politicians who waited, clamoring, for transport to Britain; *he* did not know that junior officers were commonly returned home, like empty packing-cases, in slow ships, instead of fast aircraft. The fact was that the authorities in London wanted very badly to talk with Sylvester.

But, in any case, Dr. Schmidt was too late to make the effort, for when he returned to the ship Sylvester was already in the air, on his way to Scotland.

Dr. Schmidt wasted no time in bemoaning his luck. He gave the order to sail, determined to keep his own counsel until he saw what came of Sylvester's revelations, if indeed he had the courage to make any. As soon as the *Agraria* reached Scröm, the Agrarian capital on the shores of Lake Prontis, the 998 antenna was taken down from the mast and locked in the cabin which bore its name, and a sentry was mounted night and day outside that cabin. Dr. Schmidt refused to make a statement to the hordes of journalists, special correspondents and agency men who besieged the *Presidenzhof*. Into that building, which has so often been compared by artistic tourists, unfavorably, with St. Pancras Station, and over which Ruskin rhapsodized in seventeen pages of his finest prose, the President vanished: nor will it ever be known what his intentions were. A well-balanced man, it is probable that he would have given up any idea of making capital out of so dangerous a secret as he possessed. But his successor, Dr. Melli, was another kind of man, and as it happened it was to Dr. Melli that it fell to deal with the matter.

For, on the morning after Dr. Schmidt's unspectacular and reticent return to his country and his post, it was announced to the press that he had died in the night.

Dr. Melli, summoned to the Presidential suite, had found his chief in some sort of fit. Two terrified girls,

hastily wrapped in kimonos, crouched in a corner of the room like mice which the cat has demoralized. They were alumnae of an establishment for young ladies, known in smart Agrarian circles as *Chez Aspasia*. On a small table was the remains of a vast stew of those fresh-water mussels from Lake Prontis of which the President had been overfond. Against the wainscot had rolled a number of bottles which had contained a vintage Montrachet.

The President's personal physician was called, took one look at the mussel shells, a much longer look at the pupils of *Aspasie*, and shrugged his shoulders almost before he had examined his patient.

"If I've warned him once," he said, "I've warned him a hundred times."

"Can you make him conscious?" the Vice-President had urged.

"I'll try."

The doctor needled some powerful drug into the stout arm of his august patient, whose congested features and stertorous breathing indicated the critical nature of his condition. But presently Dr. Schmidt breathed more easily, opened his eyes, recognized his colleague at once, and announced, gasping harshly:

"I'm done for, Andreas."

The Vice-President did not contradict him.

"Done for," the other gasped, caught his breath, groaned out, "you're a damned scoundrel, Andreas, but it's your turn. But for the love of God don't play the fool with 998. Here is the truth. Tell it . . . the truth, Andreas, the truth, if it's for the first and last time . . ."

This last direction to his lieutenant had cost the dying Father of his Country his remnant of strength; and thus, not unworthily, the great man, pointing a portentous finger and rolling his eyes, passed over.

It was hardly to be expected that Dr. Melli would give an exact account of this transaction to the world. He had given a more suitable account to the Press, telling how he had found Dr. Schmidt dead at his desk, dead of overwork in the service of his country.

What, following his somewhat singular last adjuration, had the dying President been about to say? Dr. Melli did not know; and it was certainly unfortunate that Dr. Schmidt had died before he could pass on to his successor the truth which he used his last breath to recommend.

I 5

ANDREAS MELLI came of noble stock, his ancestors were Counts of the Prontine Marshes, but reduced to poverty during the past three generations. Andreas considered that his grandfather and his father had robbed him of his birthright, and resented it. His father earned a more or less honest living by collecting insurance premiums, monthly, for the Agrarian Life Assurance Company. Consequently, once a month, there was a substantial sum of money in the house which Andreas, on the night of his nineteenth birthday, took for himself. He went on a tour through Europe, studying customs, and in particular democratic institutions, chiefly in France.

It was in that country that he realized that there were two sorts of thieves in the world: the industrious ones who made fortunes by robbing the common people; and the

lazy ones who battered upon the industrious by going into politics. He decided to emulate the latter, and returned to his own country where he discovered that the situation was such that, in order to develop his nuisance value, he would have to be a Socialist. He joined the party, therefore, and his really remarkable powers of organizing, and of calling forth the worst in people by means of his oratory, turned a group of doctrinaire idealists into a formidable caucus; of gentle Marxists into hard-mouthed businessmen; of social planners into clever opportunists. The death of Dr. Schmidt had placed Dr. Melli at the head of this Party, and of the State.

Dr. Melli called for all the available information on 998. The report to which he gave most of his attention was one based upon a photograph of the now world-famous antenna, made by a French spy in the pay of Germany who was also supplying the Agrarian Foreign Office with material. It was a report which, had Sylvester been able to read it, might have caused him to doubt his sanity. There it was, in black and white; a study of a broken perambulator and a pawn-broker's sign, thoughtfully annotated by half a dozen Doctors of Science of the University of Scröm. There it was, the antenna of a power-transmitting electro-magnetic radiator, and a threat to the precarious peace of the world.

Dr. Melli, with no reason and certainly no desire to question the authority of his advisers, read on, fascinated: for each of the three balls, which were solemnly described as "being arranged somewhat after the fashion of a pawn-broker's sign," an explanation and series of logarithmic equations were suggested. The two wheels, which had once transported an infant citizen of Edinburgh, were accounted for as reflectors, and the very number of their spokes was, it seemed, a mathematical, a scientific, a logical

necessity, each having its beautiful equation. Nor did the Doctors of Physics stop at that, but extended their observations to the size of the hubs. There was a long and learned dissertation upon the length of the handlebar, issuing in deductions, in estimates of the range, in a polar diagram, in estimates of the frequency and the power of the whole contrivance. And the trivial truth, that beneath all this science was a smashed and worn-out baby carriage and the sign of a pledge office was utterly smothered and for ever lost.

The problem which confronted Dr. Melli when he had been through the file on 998 was by no means an easy one. To what Truth had Dr. Schmidt referred, with his dying breath? What was there which the dead man had known and which he, Andreas, didn't know? He would have to find out, but his political health was delicate, his balance precarious. He would need technical advice; but his adviser must be at once competent and completely without the inclination, or at least the means, to act on his own account.

Dr. Melli was not a man to share his power unless he had to do so, but neither was he a man to cut off his nose to spite his face. And then, like all Ministers of oligarchic governments on the Roman, Soviet Union, or United States model, it was necessary for him to be very careful not to offend, by a want of respectful attention to vested interests, the real masters of his country. He was under the necessity of being more accommodating than his real nature: he never knew when, unknowingly, he was dealing with a majority shareholder in the joint-stock company which was Agraria. What he did know was that Dr. Schmidt, a man so clever that he had sometimes outwitted Dr. Melli himself, appeared to have been afraid of this affair of 998.

And evidently he had been right: the whole subject was becoming what the *Daily Press* reporter, using archaic American, called dynamite. A Sunday newspaper suggested that Sylvester Green had disappeared. H. M. Government insisted that they knew perfectly well where he was. The Russian Government, and the American Federation of Industrialists, who so frequently found themselves in close agreement, denounced this as a stupid and obvious bluff, and demanded, in their several ways, that the British Secret Service yield up their victim to the United Nations immediately. The British opposition and the American liberals accused the Russians of kidnaping the inventor. A number of scientists in the United States, Canada, Britain and France, who signed a document declaring that there was much to be said on both sides, were immediately tried for accepting a bribe of a bottle of gin per head from Communist agents, and all safely tucked away in prison for ten years. Fourteen Czech, eleven Roumanian, eighteen Bulgarian, and five Albanian Communist Cabinet Ministers confessed that they were plotting with Jugoslavia to get hold of the man Green on behalf of the Western Imperialists.

But Andreas Melli remained so silent, the members of his government so dutifully held their tongues, that gradually the questioning and accusing eyes of the whole world turned upon Agraria.

Dr. Melli, trying to guide himself by world opinion, had been briefly inclined to accept the suggestion of an American newspaper, and thus to give a work of pure fiction the cachet of official confirmation.

"There is still," wrote the sober and well-informed *Monitor*, "no news of Sylvester Green and the aerial of the power radiator which vanished six days ago from the Agrarian warship *Agraria* in mysterious circumstances. It

was at first announced by the Agrarian Government that Green himself had removed this vital part of the invention, but a thorough investigation has since revealed that a party of men boarded the ship at night disguised as Senior Officers of the Agrarian Navy, and removed the apparatus. Bos'n Bretzka of the Agrarian Naval Reserve, who once spent a week in Gdynia, is reported to have heard these men exchange remarks in a language which, although it did not arouse his suspicions at the time owing to the great language differences from class to class in his country, he has since recognized as Russian."

Thus the respectable and conservative *Monitor*. But, from over the French-Agrarian border, came *Sans Culotte*, with a gigantic headline announcing: *Green in American Concentration Camp . . .*

"Employant des méthodes de gangsters de Chicago, des employés de la Légation des États Unis à Scröm ont enlevé le camarade Green et son appareil. Green, dont l'intention a toujours été de se confier à nos alliés soviétiques, est maintenant entre les mains ensanglantées des torquemadas du A.F.I., qui, par des moyens aussi louches que connus et qu'ils ont, dans le temps, enseignés aux vedettes de la Gestapo, sont en train d'interroger leur victime. Mais courage, camarades, il tiendra! La trahison n'est pas à craindre, et d'ailleurs le camarade Staline . . ."

But in the end the new President was forced to rely upon action and his own resources.

16

AT midnight on the day of his coming at last to this decision Dr. Melli ushered two men into his study: one was a simple artisan with a bag of tools, who continually touched his cap, not only when addressed, but also in the intervals. He had starved in his time and he made these placatory gestures to Fate, as much as to his betters. The other man was Dr. Hyman Pflumbaum, perhaps the greatest of living electro-magneticians, the Clerk-Maxwell of the twentieth century. If he did not touch his cap, it was because he could not afford one.

Dr. Pflumbaum had invented the hollow-cavity magnetron long before any of the other inventors, but he was unlucky and had been unable to publish his results. At one time a Soviet Citizen, he had taken the opportunity of a wartime mission to America to abandon his country: for he had carelessly expressed the opinion that not even the pungent will of Mr. Stalin could alter the nature of a negative electrical charge in an atom. He was in danger of being shot, for the Physics Committee of the Communist Party wished to proceed against him as an heresiarch, and he had therefore remained in America and applied for citizenship. Unhappily, before his final papers came through, he had expressed the opinion that there exists within the atom a rigid order, and that no electron is free to leave it and set up in business on its own. Warned, in time, that the sleuths of the Federal Bureau of Investigation were on his trail, he fled the country and took refuge in Scröm, where he was welcomed and given a post at the

University. Citizenship was withheld until he should have proved his loyalty, and Dr. Melli was now giving him a chance to earn it by his discretion.

"This man," the President indicated the workman with a gesture, "will accompany you to the *Agraria* and force in for you the door of the 998 cabin, the keys of which are lost. You will then send him away and make a full examination of the apparatus, and report to me personally. You will be secret. Should anything leak out about this set, Herr Doktor, I shall have no hesitation in handing you over to the F.B.I. or the G.P.U., whichever is the nearer."

"Excellency," replied the man of science, "I shall be as secret as the grave."

He spoke on a note of fine and bitter irony. Dr. Melli had tried to frighten him, but at long last he was past being frightened, past everything but a soured and secret determination to get back at these imbeciles who had made him utterly contemptible in his own eyes.

"That's right," said the President grimly, "as the grave."

I 7

ON arrival at the airport, Sylvester found a car waiting for him. Had Lady Betty known that he was expected, she would certainly have been there to meet him, but his movements had been kept secret, and it was for the same reason that he had been brought to Rosyth and not to London. The car was driven by a Marine, whom Sylvester, in a state of miserable uncertainty and anxiety, tried to

question. He felt desperately in need of some ordinary, friendly words, but the man was either stupid or discreet, and in any case had a grudge against all officers at the moment, owing to a temporary shortage of chocolate at the canteen.

At the naval barracks Sylvester was received by an escort, almost as if he were under arrest, and taken directly to Captain Owbridge. With the S.R.O. was an officer of distinguished appearance and such awe-inspiring seniority that his arms seemed one blaze and glory of gold from wrist to elbow, his breast like the plumage of some gorgeous African bird. Withdrawn and watchful, this officer was Admiral St. Just. He acknowledged the Captain's introduction of his subordinate with a grave look.

But Captain Owbridge was as gentle and as amiable as ever. He saw that Sylvester was in a wretched state of nervous anxiety, and tried to put him at his ease by using a casual manner.

"Well, Green," he said, "you'd better tell us all about it. I take it you know that, for the moment, you are the most interesting young man in the world?"

Admiral St. Just frowned slightly at this want of formality, and then fixed his light eyes on the Lieutenant. That young man's obvious distress annoyed him: what was amiss with the fool?

Sylvester had come into the Captain's office fully determined to shed the burden of his secret at once, and had the Admiral not been present it is certain that he would have burst out with his account without delay. But the Admiral frightened him, he gave him an anguished glance, which was intercepted by the Captain who said:

"Get on with it, boy. The Admiral won't eat you!"

Sylvester, who knew what the Captain did not, was hardly reassured by the wintry smile vouchsafed by the

Admiral. But reflecting that delay would not mend the matter, he looked a plea for merciful understanding at Owbridge, and said:

"It was all a joke, sir."

This beginning, though effective, was not well received, for both officers sat up sharply in their chairs. St. Just caught and held the wincing eyes of Sylvester. He said, sternly:

"Now listen, Green. Let me give you an idea of your situation: an unknown electronic device appears on the ship of a fifth-class power, while she is in a British port. You are the only officer of a Great Power who has had access to the thing. It is known that the device will destroy an aircraft in a flash, in full flight. It is believed by our allies and . . . and others, that this is a British invention, and that in using the Agrarians to make trial of it we are playing some very deep and subtle game. The Americans have already accused us of withholding from them a new and powerful weapon and threaten to cut down our pension. The French are revising the old cry of perfidious Albion. The Russians have said nothing, but they have moved fifty divisions into Germany. Lieutenant Green . . ." and at this point the Admiral got to his feet and towered over the cowering junior, "young man . . . *this is no joke!*"

"I don't think, sir, that Green meant that exactly," Owbridge said, his eyes, full of curiosity, on Sylvester's face.

The Admiral muttered an imprecation and sat down again. But his manner, the conciseness of his summing up, above all his handsome and distinguished appearance, had made a great impression upon Sylvester, who was highly suggestible. He no longer hesitated to speak, and unconsciously he reproduced the Admiral's manner.

"The object, sir, which is terrorizing the Russians and

arousing the envy of our allies, is the sign of a pledge office and a broken baby carriage." And Sylvester, hastily anticipating any explosion from his astounded audience, went straight on to give an exact and succinct account of the whole transaction. Admiral St. Just and Captain Owbridge heard him out in silence and without change of expression, and not until he had finished did the Admiral exclaim, "Oh, my God!"

As for Owbridge, he made no more attempt than had Dr. Schmidt in similar case, to control his laughter; he sat at his desk, his elbow on the top, his forehead resting on the heel of his hand, and shook. The tears of his laughter ran down and soaked into the blotter.

"Owbridge!" the Admiral exclaimed, "have you taken leave of your senses?"

The Captain made an effort, controlled his voice.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "but really . . ." He lost hold of his gravity again, pushed a copy of the day's *Times* across the table to his senior, his finger shaking over a headline and a paragraph. Frowning impatiently the Admiral took up the paper and read, aloud:

"Has the Prime Minister considered well that this House has a right to be told? That if those evil men who raised themselves up against us have now been cast down, yet others arise, men of power and cunning and large resources with wicked designs upon the sacred principles, as well as the mere property, of ourselves and our great Ally across the Western Ocean? This device, product of the inexhaustible British genius, of which this House has had to learn from the public press, ever vigilant in the cause of freedom, this device may enable us to restore a balance sorely disturbed; to resume our benevolent tutelage of those eastern nations

brought to liberty under our guidance; to speak as equals with that good and mighty man to whom has been entrusted the sublime destiny of the American people and therefore of the free peoples of the world. Aye, sir, and to speak as man to man with that powerful and evil genius, that great and terrible warrior, who broods, like some destructive monster, within the dark and secret chambers of the Kremlin! (*Cries of "Oh!", and "Stow it!"*). I ask you, sir, to arrange for this House to go into secret session, when this epoch-making British invention can receive . . ."

"A pledge-office sign!" the Captain spluttered, "a baby carriage!"

The Admiral tossed the paper contemptuously from him. Nevertheless, he was smiling; he began to chuckle, and presently only Sylvester, conscious that it would be improper for him to join in this Olympian merriment, maintained his gravity.

The two officers regained their calm, looked at each other, and at Sylvester.

"What is to be done?" Owbridge said.

"Who else knows the truth?" St. Just asked Sylvester. It was typical of the man that he wasted no time over recriminations, that he uttered no reproaches, that he dealt with the situation as it was. Sylvester told him that apart from certain brother officers, now in the Far East, only President Schmidt knew the facts. Chivalrously, he said nothing of Lady Betty Singleton.

"Schmidt!" the Captain exclaimed, "Schmidt died last night."

The Admiral took no notice of Sylvester's surprise at this news. He rose from his chair and for some moments thoughtfully paced the room. Presently he said:

"The other two officers can be kept at sea in small ships."

Owbridge nodded and again St. Just was silent, walking the room with his hands behind his back.

"As for Green . . ." he said, at last.

"Close arrest?" the Captain suggested. The Admiral shook his head. Both senior officers turned their eyes on Sylvester and studied him as if he were a moderately interesting problem in naval strategy.

The Admiral shook his head decisively.

"The American Ambassador," he said, "would wheedle him or hector him out of our hands in no time. No . . . if we keep him at all, we'll have to shoot him."

"*Pour encourager les autres*," Owbridge murmured, for he was a man of some reading. So, however, was St. Just.

"In the circumstances," he said, "it would hardly be a crime. But it might be a blunder."

So overpowering was the naval atmosphere, the Nelsonian afflatus generated by the two officers that Sylvester, breathing it, was for a while as thoroughly convinced as themselves of the paramountcy of the interests of the Service. He had not received that training which makes of R.N. officers virtual Janissaries, self-disregarding; but, like a novice priest who receives holiness by the laying on of hands, he received that detachment from personality which the situation demanded, and would perhaps, had he been called upon to do so, have urged his own death. Nevertheless, he was both frightened and puzzled.

"Are we not to publish the truth, sir?" he inquired of the Admiral, respectfully. The latter looked at him, and, for the first time, smiled indulgently.

"The truth, my boy, has been published. The truth is your 998 as this fellow Singleton, as the Government, as we at Admiralty, as the principalities and powers have

made it. The truth is what people believe, not what a handful of men know."

Sylvester was silenced.

"I don't think we should shoot him, sir," Captain Owbridge said.

The Admiral agreed: "Nevertheless, he's got to be put out of the way." He turned abruptly on Sylvester, "Can we trust you to disappear . . . but *completely*?"

"Yes, sir." St. Just stared at him for a full half minute, and then he nodded, satisfied. To the Captain he said, suddenly curt and even harsh:

"Green is to be taken from here under armed escort, aboard the flagship. Tomorrow it will be announced that he has been court-martialed for . . . espionage . . . and shot. I shall arrange for him to receive a civilian identity card and discharge papers, under the name of . . ." he hesitated, snapped his fingers . . . "Sylvester Grant. It will be your responsibility to get him out of the Command area unnoticed, and to arrange a means whereby we can reach him if necessary."

Sylvester had turned very white as he heard what was to happen to his reputation, and when the Admiral had finished he blurted out:

"My people, sir . . ."

"Sorry," the Admiral said, curtly. "You are not to communicate with them, you understand? You are under orders."

"Aye, aye, sir. But, sir, the aerial . . . the thing is still on that Agrarian ship . . ."

The Admiral paid no attention: the point raised by Sylvester was for others to deal with. Captain Owbridge was telephoning, and presently the armed escort was announced. The Captain turned to Sylvester.

"I'm sorry about this," he said. "Perhaps, later, it may

be possible . . .” He offered Sylvester his hand. So did even the Admiral, showing at last his fundamental good-nature:

“What’s in a name, Mr. Grant?” he said.

I 8

SYLVESTER arrived in London: his hair was dyed, his papers, and therefore his legal identity, were those of Sylvester Grant, and in them he was described as an arc welder. Was this description a manifestation of Admiral St. Just’s humor? Instead of his handsome uniform, Sylvester wore an ill-fitting suit of shoddy, his country’s gift, and in his bag he carried two shirts, three pairs of socks, and two new denim overalls.

A man who had been shot by his country for a military crime, and who had risen again with another name and another character, Sylvester discovered in himself a melancholy and tender regard for his dead self. He recognized that Sylvester Green had had a world before him, that everything had been possible to him. He had, since his childhood, been mining treasures of appetite and curiosity within himself, treasures to be invested in a world whose moving beauty and miraculous diversity, formerly taken for granted, now roused in Sylvester Grant an almost religious fervor of frustrated admiration. For, at the very outset of his enjoyment of these good and glorious things, of sunrise and sunset, of fertile land and barren sea, of *wein, weib und gesang*, Green had been cut off; and

for that Grant was near shedding tears which hung upon his eye-lashes.

For Sylvester Grant recognized that he was not as Sylvester Green. Sylvester Green had been unique, a special person: he saw that now. But Sylvester Grant, sprung from no woman's womb, fruit of no man's loins, was—what? He was, Sylvester thought, that dreary creature without a future which one called *other people*. Grant had no validity, did not appeal to himself as a uniquely interesting, strange, secret and self-adoring individual. He was not, and never could be, an immortal soul, an ecstatic lover, a doting parent, a curious discoverer. He was what his papers called him, and Sylvester faced the fact grimly, an arc welder who might, by close application to business, earn five pounds a week, and might enjoy what liberty, what experience of the world of sense and mind were possible to a man imprisoned within the mean limits of that trifling sum of money. He was, of course, the perfect citizen: not a man of grass and poetry, component and enemy of the State, but the State's own darling creature, a paper man, a worker, a cell in the lower income group, a Gallup-poll answerer, one of a football crowd.

But he took no pride in that.

Sylvester sought and found lodgings in an alley off Ebury Street, indifferent to their quality. The only subject which was still able to move him to an authentic feeling was one which he dared not entertain: the shame and agony of his parents. And if he *did* allow himself to think of that, a new and terrible cynicism worked in him to neutralize his pain. Was it certain that the Sunday-newspaper notoriety which his parents must be enjoying was too dearly bought by his disgrace and awful death? Might they not be enjoying their own poses and attitudes, learned from the cinema and the *News of the Universe*?

Such thoughts possessed him as he looked at the room which was offered him; they were visible on his face, and his prospective landlady pitied him. She was an elderly slut with half-falling hair streaked grey and yellow. A sacklike garment of serge covered her gross and shapeless body. Sylvester looked at the woman and was filled with terror and despair: this was what ordinary people, those *other people*, to whose ranks Sylvester Grant belonged, could come to in the end.

Once, in the ship's library, Sylvester had read a translation of the *Iliad* and been moved by its promise of eternal youth. Here was a world of people all physically handsome, all moved by large passions, regardless of age. It was in that spirit that he, too, was going to grow older, retaining those qualities of mind and body in which, once the poet had revealed them to him as his own, he gloried. Even the aged Nestor had not, it seemed, decayed: Sylvester recalled, with a shudder, the sight of his mother before breakfast, slack-mouthed, without her teeth, and in grubby stays. Well, the poet's lie could save him from that: he had only to believe it.

But that faith was not possible for Sylvester Grant. In that new and hopeless avatar, confronted by a woman not more than ordinarily mishandled by life and injured by time, Sylvester saw the revolting and ridiculous truth: an ugly and pathetic lump of flesh inhabited by a spirit kind, indeed, but how small, how frightened, how pitiful, how insignificant, and how absurd!

"I'll take the room," he said.

Why not? It was somewhere to rest when the activities prescribed for him came to a daily end. Those activities would be manual and tiring, but he was not afraid of that: he was, and he knew it, hardly fitted for anything more, and found the prospect less disagreeable than the clerking

which a gentle Labor Exchange officer, noting his accent and manner, had offered him. That lower-middle class contempt for the work of the hands, inculcated by his mother, had been worked out of Sylvester. He had scrubbed too many decks, washed too many clothes, cleaned too many latrines, kneaded too many good duffs, to remember his mother's teaching.

Sylvester gave the woman some money, threw down his bag beside the bed, and, with his green card in his hand, went out to find, somewhere behind Victoria Station, the premises of Messrs. Brindlehough and Co.

It was a small factory inserted in the hollow shell of a terrace of eighteenth-century houses. Of the grace and beauty of these buildings (and had not Sylvester's landlady once been a firm-fleshed girl!), nothing now remained but a shadow of the line, and even that was broken here and there by bomb damage. Moreover, in the very middle of the terrace a great, gaping arch had been cut and supported on steel girders. This, passing through the building, led to a yard, where the firm's lorries were loaded.

Sylvester did not see Mr. Brindlehough, but he heard him. While he waited in the wall-board office, occupied by files, a typewriter and a stout girl in glasses, with a skin like old putty, whose jaws moved disgustingly in the complacent rhythm of the gum-addict, he heard the old gentleman's voice, shrill and peevish, coming from the adjacent office. He was addressing some person for whom he seemed to have little respect. The words "*absolute secrecy*," "*very confidential*," "*Government contract*," came to Sylvester, and for the rest a kind of inarticulate nagging. The victim of this ordeal presently emerged to ask, wearily, what Sylvester wanted. He was a plump, bald man of thirty-five or forty who had the air of only just keeping enough self-possession to run the factory. His name was

Barton. Sylvester explained himself, and on learning that this applicant was an arc welder, the harassed manager ejaculated a heartfelt "Thank God!"

"I'm not awfully good, though," Sylvester explained. His candor was as much a product of his Grant-induced indifference, as of his want of experience of being hungry and out of a job. Its effect on Mr. Barton was singular.

"You seem," he said, "to be a superior sort of man."

There was no rejoinder for this, and in any case their conversation was interrupted by a third party, a workman wearing dungarees and an apron. Short and broad of body, his head and face had a scholarly cast, a sort of absent-minded nobility, so that the dirt which was smeared across his brow, and the fact that his face was marred by a three-day growth of beard, were irrelevant. The man was carrying a drawing, and began to point out some fault in it, but was interrupted by the manager, who said:

"Ah, Clough, here's your new arc welder. Name of Grant."

Clough nodded in a friendly manner to Sylvester, and then he and the manager plunged into a discussion of the faulty drawing, from which the foreman emerged to lead Sylvester down to the workshop.

"What sort of work is it?" Sylvester inquired, as they crossed the littered yard.

"We're a small concern. No mass production, each job different and special, hand work, mostly skilled. Sheet metal and other stuff. We specialize in welding difficult metals and get a lot of experimental stuff from the Service departments. What they call top secret, by the way, Barton should have told you that. You have to keep your trap shut."

Sylvester felt himself very much drawn to the foreman. He had a manner which was grave, but his gravity over-

lay a base of humor and tolerance. He seemed to find the world rather silly, but the people who worked in it worthy of respect and attention. When he and Sylvester reached the main welding shop, they found the three other welders seated on a bench, drinking tea out of mugs, and eating sandwiches made of split rolls and dripping. Clough sent a ginger-headed child for another of these lunches.

"We start at seven," he told Sylvester, "and have a break now, at ten." He introduced the others and there was handshaking all round, so that Sylvester was reminded of his contacts with French naval officers.

"Demobbed?" asked a curly-haired young man with a shy expression. Sylvester nodded.

"Army?"

"Navy."

Another of the welders, a man of forty with sleek, yellow hair, and thick glasses behind which his eyes seemed to glower, said, provocatively:

"The 'ole thing was unnecessary."

"Now then, Joe, don't you start," Clough said, with his mouth full. As he ate he was unrolling a large blueprint on the bench beside him.

"Ar," the other said, "but wot's it all bin about? It's like wot I say, the muckin' Jews. *An'* we aren't done wiv 'em yet, neither. There they are, in ve seats of the mighty as you might say . . . Churchill, Stalin, Truman, Attlee . . . muckin' lot of Yids. *I* know."

"You've been at it again," Clough said, tolerantly, as if he were referring to some mildly noxious vice. He held out his hand:

"Come on, give, give . . ."

With a kind of wriggle of annoyance the other delved into a pocket and produced a pamphlet issued by the organization of Sir Oswald Mosley.

"I've a use for that," Clough said, and jumping off the bench, left the workshop. The curly-haired young man said, just as if the disgruntled fascist were not there:

"Don't take no notice of Joe, mate. Victim o' capitalism. Never had a job till he was thirty-five. On the dole, see? You don't get over that in a hurry. Still, it's all over now. We've won."

"The war, you mean?" Sylvester was uncertain.

"The war! Muck the bloody war! Naow, I mean there's the Russians just across the Channel, as you might say. Of course, can't deny the Americans is still dangerous . . . but there's going to be trouble in Yankeeland. Stalin says . . ."

Sylvester was not to learn what Stalin had said, for the speaker was interrupted by the smiling return of Clough, announcing:

"Very suitable." And, turning to Sylvester, with an air of testing him, "almost as good as a goose's neck."

Sylvester merely looked startled.

"What," Clough said, "never read Rabelais? You educated people never read anything. All right, boys, time's up."

The welders drifted back to their own parts of the bench. One man began to cut out a shape in copper sheet, with a hideously noisy electric tool.

"We're supposed to be welders," Clough shouted, above the uproar, "but we do a bit all round. We claim this is the best shop in London for welding aluminium."

He jerked his head towards a piece of work set up on the bench, in a large vice, an odd-shaped structure in rods and tubes of aluminium which, like some highly significant object devised by an artist in abstract forms, had a powerful and immediate effect upon Sylvester. He stared at it, and it seemed to set up in him a feeling of anxiety,

an uneasy seeking for sense and meaning, as if it had indeed been what it somewhat resembled, the work of a talented latter-day sculptor.

"What is it?" he asked. He found, to his surprise, that he had to force out the question, as if he were afraid of the answer. But the foreman shook his head.

"Don't know," he said, "Government job. Top secret, like I told you. What they do, they send bits out to different firms, see? No one ever sees the whole job assembled."

"Not much fun for you," Sylvester suggested, his wary eye on the object in the vice, as if he suspected it of hostile intentions. Clough shrugged. He unrolled a big blueprint and held it down on the bench.

"This is what you'll have to work on. We've fifty of the things to make, and you can start on this part. By the way, I suppose you can read a drawing?"

Clough turned, questioning, to his new hand, and then his mouth fell open in astonishment, and he made an inarticulate sound of amazement.

Sylvester was gaping at the open blueprint in horror. His face was as white as a sheet of paper, and in his wide and staring eyes was the incipient light of madness.

"998," he said, at length, in a harsh croak, "998. Oh, my God!"

In horror and despair he looked at the astounded foreman. He tried to take hold of his self-control, to begin some explanation, to smile reassuringly, but it was utterly impossible. Had he, the thought corroded his self-possession, had he died in vain?

Sylvester turned abruptly and ran out of the shop, up the stairs to street level, and so out into a vast thoroughfare of rattling trams and crowding buses, brilliantly-colored barrows of fruit, and countless jostling, hurrying, tight-lipped pedestrians. Like the victim of a hunt or a hue

and cry, he turned this way and that, seeking a way out of the solid, reeking mass of vehicles, people, houses. He plunged blindly into the uproar, flying from that neat and precise drawing in white lines. He did not even pause at the kerb, and had he stepped off it is certain that he would have been ground to pulp by the massed juggernauts of London Transport, now thundering ponderously northward in obedience to the carelessly-dropped arm of a policeman.

But a firm, restraining hand was placed on the young man's arm, holding him back in safety, and a voice of authority said:

"Here." It was Clough who stood beside him. "Here, what's the matter, towny?" he said. He was blowing a little, and he appeared angry at being made to run. But beneath these superficial appearances Sylvester sensed and was thankful for an infinite tolerance, a profound sympathy.

I 9

WHEN Sylvester was shot, Lady Betty went, beautiful in tears, to Captain Owbridge, and pleaded for an explanation. Neither her beauty nor her tears could move that gallant officer from his discretion, yet he was much disconcerted, and she, from behind the effective barrier of her grief, watched him shrewdly. He had reached the age when the mere idea of young love, when the memory of

opportunities lost, of sentiment despised, could not leave him calm. The girl put him into that state of mind which produced the adage *Si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait*. It was intolerable to him that he should be forced to lie to this lovely young noblewoman, whose superficial smart polish hid, he was sentimentally sure, a melting, a breaking heart. Might she not, like Ophelia, go melancholy mad? Or, like Desdemona's maid Barbara, sit with hanging, imbecile head and sing:

. . . *A song of willow,
And old thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune,
And she died singing it.*

The Captain, however, made a loyal effort to lie like an officer. Perhaps he might have indulged his sentimentality to the extent of being thoroughly unconvincing in his lying but there was Lady Betty's connection, her father, to think of. He dared not face an inquest at the hands, and eyes, and reporter's nose of the persistent and penetrating Simes. Not even the authority of Admiralty would enable him to face and flout the journalistic earl; for, as Tom Staple, in a prophetic moment, said to Mr. Arabin and the Master of Lazarus, "The Government's to find us all in everything, and the Press is to find the Government."

So Captain Owbridge had lied, as he thought, convincingly. He did not take his steady eyes from those of his weeping secretary, did not stammer, did not show the outward signs of sympathy he must, if he spoke the truth, as Betty was certain, be feeling. "I am very sorry for you, Betty," he said, "but Sylvester Green is dead."

And she, of course, was then certain that Sylvester Green, however concealed, was alive, and that both his continuance in life as well as his pretended death were connected with the rumors and stories concerning 998

which already filled the front pages of the newspapers. She asked for, and was given, leave; and with her consoling certainty, and all the excitement of possessing a secret of importance, she went to see her father. The apparent death of Sylvester had made him precious, and she, who had secretly believed that love, in the novelist's sense, was no more than an artistic convention, found herself dreaming like a silly girl.

She found her father enjoying enormously the uproar created by his revelatory writings. No man in Lord Singleton's position is considered capable of a genuine indiscretion, and all his blunders must be looked upon as deliberate. The greatest imbecile in the world, once the gambler's chance has made him rich and powerful, automatically ceases to be an idiot and becomes a man of talent, for the sufficient reason that if this were not so then those whom he had bested would be forced not only to realize that they had been over-reached by a fool, but that the institutions and systems supported by them were so imperfect as to allow the triumph of a half-witted vulgarian like so-and-so, over men of taste and talent such as themselves.

It was not, therefore, enough for the great men who, like the little ones, read Lord Singleton's articles to accept the facts which that nobleman exposed: they must also consider for what cunning reason he had done so. To the men in the Kremlin it was obvious that Lord Singleton was acting in his capacity as a monopoly capitalist giving orders to the social-democratic traitors who were his jackals. 998 was aimed at Russia. Since it was impossible that the decadent science of the West could have invented anything not possible to Soviet science, the U.S.S.R. would soon possess the secret, and there could be no harm in anticipating the happy day. *Pravda* carried an article describing the new Soviet ray which, radiating a force of fifty

megawatts, could destroy the largest battleship at a range of fifty miles.

The chiefs of the Western states now flew like frightened children to their scientists, to know what truth there might be in this claim. Now, the scientific oracles had recently been much puzzled, although of course they did not admit it, by a radiation of unknown origin which was interfering with their apparatus, and which had, like the weather, crop-failures, the defeat of the Arsenal football team, and a war in Patagonia, been attributed to sunspots. But here, surely, was the Russian ray?

For the Americans the whole thing was another attempt on the part of the bought-and-paid-for, but untrustworthy British, to avoid their bounden duty, that of placing their armies and cities between the American way of life and the apelike submen of bolshevik Eurasia. From the Quai d'Orsay it was announced that France could have made the new device as early as 1920, but was restrained by tender and humanitarian considerations for the enemy bomber pilots.

For some time the impact of the scientific discovery dulled the senses of the world to that of its political consequences, but then it began to be asked in what manner the British and the Agrarians were linked together. A brilliant American publicist proved that the British, shirking their manifest duty of defending America, were about to form a league of armed neutrals. The British Government denied this and took a most singular line: it told the truth. It knew, it declared, nothing of 998, had not fitted the device to the *Agraria* for the good reason that it possessed no such device, and had no real evidence that the thing even existed. Naturally, this was believed by nobody, because the agents of every power swarmed like aphides in the factories and offices of the most perfidious of all

nations, and were able to produce photographs of the innumerable documents in which 998 was named.

Mr. Simes and his owner were among the sceptics who discounted the administration's disclaimer. They knew better: why had the *Agraria* come to England in the first place? Why had Green been seconded to that ship? It was Lady Betty who destroyed the complacency of this knowing mood. She had, she said, reason to believe that they were at fault, that everyone was wrong, that only she knew all the truth.

Sylvester Green was the inventor of 998.

This astonishing disclosure was made in Agar Simes' office, only Lord Singleton and the journalist being present to hear it. Lady Betty rose from the table round which they were seated, leaving her audience stunned by the implications of what she had said. She walked to the tall floor-to-ceiling window and looked down upon the nervous uproar of Fleet Street's traffic, and when she spoke again it was as if shyly, with seeming diffidence and even pain. She spoke aloud, yet, had they known it, she was talking to herself, uttering a daydream, for the joy of hearing it expressed.

"I have known about it for some time. You see, we . . . we loved each other. I was his only confidant. He had been working at the thing for years, in his father's workshops. The war came and he was called up, and not until he had his commission, with tools and material at his disposal, could he resume his work. You must understand that Sylvester is a sensitive, deeply humane man, profoundly shocked by his experiences in action. By the time he had completed his invention he had lost confidence even in his own side. Yet he was ready to place the thing at the service of his country. But then the atom bombs were dropped, and he saw in this an unnecessary and vicious atrocity. His

posting to Agraria seemed to offer a God-given opportunity for relief of his tortured spirit. A small but highly civilized nation which had given ten centuries' proof of obstinate neutrality was, he thought, alone fit to wield the force he had devised. The rest you know."

Lady Betty fell silent, deliciously moved by pity for the self she had evoked, the widowed sweetheart of a great and good man. She had achieved this by speaking aloud what is, as a rule, kept close. But the speech had served another purpose than the gratification of her interest in herself. Now, for the first time, she understood herself, was certain that she really was in love with Sylvester Green.

There is a sentimental illusion, industriously put about by females, commonly received and barely questioned by males, that a woman in love accepts or is blind to the shortcomings of the beloved. This fantasy is the product of confusion; women are not commonly in love with real men, but rather with the creatures of romantic and ambitious imagination. While Sylvester was no more than the object of Betty's affection, she sternly refused to indulge her love for him. But when the opportunity occurred to make something of him, she was able to indulge her feelings.

"Then," Mr. Simes said in the low and reverential voice called for by the lady's grief, "there can be no doubt that the Agrarians have this weapon?"

"None. Why do you think we . . . we shot him?"

The two men bowed their heads and were silent in the presence of the self-control of this tragic girl, but they could hardly maintain this attitude indefinitely, and at last the earl said:

"We must know their intentions."

"Let me," Betty said, "go and find out."

They regarded her thoughtfully.

"You remember Melli?" her father asked.

"No. But I've met the Ambassador, who's a lamb. He'd help . . ."

"Ah, Sir Branson Rose," Mr. Simes took up, "one of the old school. Melli, on the other hand, is no Schmidt. A dangerous opportunist, incalculable . . . handsome, by the way; and always with a tremendous air of consequence . . ."

20

IF Dr. Melli ever had reason to appear consequential, it was at this very time, when Mr. Simes was passing so severe a judgment on him. No statesman had ever carried a more weighty matter in his head. Dr. Hyman Pflumbaum's report, and the extraordinary change in his manner when he came to deliver it, had perhaps put him within reach of the politician's paradise, supreme power; and he was very far from being a man to miss such a chance just because he seemed somewhat precariously poised.

Hyman Pflumbaum, alone in the 998 cabin, had found it empty but for the now world-famous antenna. With the quiet acceptance of all phenomena as equally significant or insignificant, of a man who has passed the stage of lively freshness at which surprise is still possible, the physicist examined the 998 aerial. And if he could not say what, in fact, the grotesque object was, he could say for certain what it was not. Even supposing an apparatus existed to feed the alleged aerial, this object could never radiate one erg of energy.

Dr. Pflumbaum, having bolted the cabin door on the inside, sat on the floor in a corner and stared at the antenna. We have already seen how it had exercised power over Sylvester; now it exercised power, but of another kind, over Dr. Pflumbaum. He stared and stared as if, by the sheer force of attention, he would penetrate the mind of the object's maker, and understand his intention. And he thought he succeeded. Suddenly he began to see that this composition of rods and balls and wheels was the very physical manifestation of a savage and wanton mockery of man by man. He recalled his own thoughts of that very morning, as he read his newspaper. There were stories of strikes by workers generously paid for short hours; stories of the little, cheating, niggling, pettifogging, straw-splitting tricks of wealthy employers to evade the contracts they had made with their workers, their governments and their fellow-citizens. He had read that in Britain the whole country was publicly trying and condemning, privately relishing and applauding, a fat and smiling commercial negotiator who had bribed officials, suborned Ministers and been served by Members of Parliament. He understood, at last, from the bottom of a heart filled with the bitter dregs of faithlessness, of cynicism, the universal mood of his fellow men, the *zeitgeist*. Their quarrels, their outcries, and outbursts of destructive violence were the peevish excesses of disappointed juvenile delinquents. The statesmen who stormed and sneered at each other in international councils were the fitting representatives of thwarted and warped adolescents, screaming and kicking against the restraints imposed by social obligations, against the natural and unchangeable opposition between absolute personal freedom to satisfy brute appetites, and any rule of law.

Dr. Pflumbaum sank even more profoundly into his

melancholy reverie. He recalled his own days in Russia, days of steadily advancing work in the laboratory as he penetrated a little deeper towards what he thought of as truth. But was it? At a small party given by a prominent Party Member, he had made his little, harmless, so-Jewish joke about the inability of even the world-shaking will of I. V. Stalin to control the motions of an electron . . . some such thing it had been. And he recalled, indifferent now and wondering at his terror, the cold, humorless eyes, like pointed tools of steel, of his powerful host, eyes turned on him speculatively, boring into him, seeking the suspected core of disloyalty beneath the integument of frivolousness which was itself, as the hush among his fellow guests told him, in damned bad taste in *that* society.

And then America: say what you like, think what you like, they had told him, on the ship, and he believed it. He was not, on the American occasion, making one of his little jokes when, in the course of a lecture, he again gave himself away and was labeled a Communist. It was his racial propensity for wide and general speculation which betrayed him, the impossibility of specializing, the real need to place his own science in the context of some general philosophy.

"Nature—" he had said, in the fatal peroration, "God, if you like—is Order, is Pattern. We hear much, in this glorious country, of man's freedom, of the overwhelmingly important rights of the individual. The idea is Christian, but Christianity itself once provided an order only within the terms of which was the individual free. Let us never forget that men are the electrons in a vast molecule in which the particles are other men, are animals, are plants, are micro-organisms, are soils, are the past and the future. Electrons, gentlemen, are not free to leave the atom and set up in business for themselves. They owe a

duty, we might say, to their molecule, their atom. Man is not outside nature, but of it, and as such he too has a duty to a rigid order."

And then the sequel: the constant, haunting presence of men with cold, humorless eyes identical with, interchangeable with, the eyes which had frightened him out of Russia. Eyes not like organs, but like small, hard machines set in round, flabby, utterly terrifying faces, the deadpans of a caste of men who, in loyalty to a Law of property, which was becoming a ruthless terror, had given up their humanity.

Dr. Pflumbaum came out of his reverie. "God damn and blast their souls to hell eternally," he said, aloud and as if to the weird iron thing which was his sole companion. "The man who made you," he said, "might have been my brother. Shall I betray him? No, no, no. We can do better than that."

And for an hour he sat and considered the plan which, as an ultimatum from the only man who, since Green's death, understood this device, he would lay before Andreas Melli. The world had tortured, abused, humiliated and broken him, Hyman Pflumbaum. In return, he would give it that security it longed for, that power which would protect each thief from his neighbor thief. There was one condition he must make: he alone, unaided, in a locked and guarded laboratory, would assemble, in a steel case to be sealed by himself with a bomb-loaded seal, the secret working-parts, wherever manufactured, of the 998 apparatus.

21

LADY BETTY arrived in Scröm, but only to leave again within a few hours, for what she learned of the Ambassador, who saw no reason to remain silent over news which would shortly be tidings of great joy to all the world, so astounded her that she flew back to England, determined to find Sylvester and raise him from the dead. She had wired the Ambassador, in her father's august name, to expect her, and an official car had been sent from which, as she was carried from the airport, and despite the gloaming of dawn, she found that she perfectly recalled the gothic streets and romantic façades of that ancient capital.

There had been no changes, except in the names of the streets and squares, and even this she expected, for the passionate neutrality of the Agrarians had long made use of street names as a means of expression. The great central avenue, originally named after the eleventh-century liberator Otterik Scröm, had borne the names of Napoleon, Wellington, Blücher, Lincoln and others; now it was divided into three parts, beginning as the *Boulevard Vincent Auriol*, turning into the *Avenida Francisco Franco* and completing itself as the *Bevinbahn*. The Presidential palace had quite recently stood in the vast *Piazza Mussolini*, had briefly found itself in the *Adolf Hitler Platz*, and was now to be sought in the *Place Chaim Weizmann*.

The Ambassador greeted his guest playfully.

"A little chit you were, when we met last. So high . . .," holding his hand about two feet from the ground, "with pigtails. Pretty as a picture, too. It is a shock, if a pleasant

one, to us old fellows, Lady Betty, to see a pretty school-girl grow into a lovely woman before we can turn round, eh?"

During dinner he told her his news, under a promise of secrecy.

". . . for nothing must be told until I have seen the Prime Minister."

And Lady Betty was aghast, the expression of her feeling being fortunately taken by His Excellency as evidence of her amazed delight.

The fact was that after his amazing interview with Dr. Hyman Pflumbaum, Dr. Melli had wasted no time: he had sent at once for the British Ambassador; and for his old acquaintance Mr. Byron Ampleforth.

The British Ambassador at Scröm was a serious handicap to the Foreign Office and a living criticism of the system upon which Ambassadors are created. He had earned his rank by close attention to duty throughout all the stages of a diplomatic career, but not one of his pre-ambassadorial posts had revealed a principal flaw in the man, his suggestibility.

One of the grave disadvantages of living in an age which teems with brilliant and conscientious novelists depicting persons of high rank and fortune, is that it becomes impossible for nature to avoid imitating art all the time, the latter commodity being in such copious supply. Professional men cannot avoid knowing what they are supposed to be like—a thousand novels, a thousand motion pictures have typed them—until it is impossible for them to be other than a cliché of a character in some work of fiction. Sir Branson Rose, for example, H.M. Ambassador at Scröm, could either be the morning-coated, monocled, high-mannered diplomat, first created by a novelist, subsequently exploited by the manufacturers of gaspers, trusses

and cures for bad breath, finally appearing, by the force of public opinion, in real life; or he could deliberately be otherwise, find himself representing and reproducing one of fifty fictitious Excellencies depicted as the more impressive for being just what one does *not* expect an Ambassador to be. The purveyors of fiction had distilled essences of character and now nothing less concentrated than these essences was acceptable. What real, working physician could hope to satisfy a people fed with the absolute essence of medical good sense, with the very marrow of a ponderous bedside manner, of sound science and sensible outspokenness which were offered to them by their radios, bravely broadcasting the facts about bowel action?

Still, had Sir Branson chosen a character out of stock and stuck to it, he might have done well enough. But the foolish man could settle on nothing. If a Frenchman, in his hearing, mentioned *le phlègme Britannique*, Sir Branson at once became so phlegmatic that he almost failed to respond to stimuli. If he saw himself referred to by a newspaper as carrying on secret negotiations, he became so insanely secretive that the Foreign Office could not find out what he was up to.

He had received no instruction in the matter of 998. The Cabinet was waiting for Sir Lewis Lassen to advise them, for it was he who had become, by force of circumstances, the expert on the subject. Admiral St. Just had communicated to Sir Lewis the facts about Green's death, and had risen to a very high place in the diplomat's esteem: this sailor, he told himself, has obtained exact information, realized its danger, and shot his informant. For perhaps half an hour the civilian envied the prerogatives of the Senior Service.

Meanwhile, he had not made up his mind how much it would be safe to tell his Minister without endangering the

public interest; he had issued no directive to his colleague in Scröm. And Agar Simes' principal scribbling rival had published a veiled attack upon Sir Lewis in the form of an analysis of Foreign Office methods, an analysis which revealed the pernicious influence of Sir Lewis upon his Ambassadors, especially in restraining that freedom of action which, in the past, had enabled Britain's representatives to speak and think and act for their country on their own initiative, with splendid results. Sir Branson read the article and was impressed.

When, therefore, Dr. Melli informed him that he proposed to offer to Great Britain, as well as to other Powers, an infallible protection against aggression of any sort, and then set forth his magnificently simple plan, Sir Branson, rejecting a first impulse to consult his Government, and bearing in mind the *Profile* of himself which was shortly to appear in no less a journal than the *Observer*, used his own judgment.

"As I understand Your Excellency," he said, "you propose to supply, in return, of course, for suitable payment, 998 posts for installation along the coasts or frontiers of any state willing to accept this protection. That you will form a neutral service of men, chiefly your own countrymen, who are to be divested of any citizenship whatsoever, and receive U.N.O. passports. They will man the posts, absolutely preventing the crossing of any frontier by hostile aircraft, or the approach to any shore of hostile shipping, regardless of nationality, cause or party."

"I congratulate Your Excellency," said Dr. Melli, "on the exactitude with which you have seized my proposals, and the conciseness with which you have expressed them."

The Ambassador bowed and the Chief of State continued:

"I should add that the men manning these posts will be

hand-picked and trained not only in neutrality, but in integrity. It will be their task to guard the secrecy of the device and the mechanism and principles involved. We have made a means whereby, if any post is tampered with by an unauthorized person, the thing will explode, destroying itself and the tamperer immediately."

"Admirable," the Ambassador said, and softly clapped his hands. He rose, ponderous and grave with the sense of the moment, its tremendous historical importance.

"Dr. Melli," he said, "I have no hesitation whatsoever in giving you an assurance of my Government's whole-hearted acceptance and support—once I have seen the device demonstrated, and provided, of course, that the financial details can be adjusted."

The necessity for demonstration had been foreseen by Dr. Pflumbaum, who was given full powers to arrange it. It was in that part that Mr. Byron Ampleforth was useful to him. Ampleforth was the European representative of half a score of British manufacturers in heavy industry, one of those remarkable men whose trade is as much political as commercial. He and Pflumbaum had formed an easy and pleasant friendship: both clever, rootless, faithless, without loyalties, they were like two adults at a children's tea party.

Ampleforth's association with Dr. Melli was of some standing. The two men dealt with each other very directly: with Andreas Melli there had never been any question of finesse: from whatever contracts the politician was able to steer in the Englishman's direction, Dr. Melli got his cut.

Dr. Pflumbaum called on Ampleforth at the latter's place of business two hours before Ampleforth was due to see the President. Dr. Pflumbaum had considered telling the other the exact truth, and then rejected that plan. Ampleforth was practical, would have nothing to do with

myth making, however profitable. In the end he made up a plausible story, told the tale of his examination of the apparatus, and then:

"The thing is genuine enough. God knows why your Government shot the inventor. In fact, I doubt whether they have done so. But my trouble is that I have to demonstrate it to the President, the Ambassadors, the Military Attachés, tomorrow. It's impossible to be ready. Melli is unreasonable, but you know my position, I dare not displease him. It's a matter of six old aeroplanes, fitted with remote control, to fly across a certain point . . . and explode. If they'd give me a week I'd undertake to bring down the combined airforces of the whole world, given a couple of megawatts of power, but as it——"

"Would you, by God! You mean the thing really *is* as good as that?"

"Listen, Byron . . . this thing puts an end to war . . . there's no shadow of doubt about it. And as for you . . . how would contracts for upwards of thirty millions suit you?"

"All right. But why the mad rush, why the phony demonstration?"

"Like a fool I dismantled the thing after we'd made our first tests, to make drawings of the assembly. I can't get it back in time. We believe . . . that is, Melli believes . . . that the British still have Green's drawings. I think it possible. Suppose there's an election, and Churchill gets in and gets his hands on the thing? . . . We'll have Britain as the world's nursemaid, and in a nasty temper."

"Hm. Six aeroplanes . . . remote control . . . and six nicely timed explosions. Is that it?"

"Exactly."

"Can do."

Byron Ampleforth had the integrity of his kind, the

efficiency of the morally indifferent: he always delivered the goods. On the day of the demonstration Dr. Pflumbaum sat at the control table in a little, cylindrical tower of bright aluminium, hastily assembled by the *Agraroptikongesellschaft*, and topped with Sylvester's strange device under a perspex dome. The tower was connected by massive cables to the nearest supply of power. Ampleforth's six aeroplanes, followed by six flying bombs, an afterthought of his own, flew across a datum line. And Dr. Pflumbaum, under the eyes of the assembled Ambassadors and Military Attachés, exploded these machines, in succession, by pressing a button.

It was the French Ambassador who turned to his English colleague and remarked, "*C'est magnifique; et c'est fini, la guerre.*"

"It is," said Sir Branson, "the end of an historical phase which has lasted a quarter of a million years."

Messrs. Brindlehough and Company, of Victoria, London, were one of Mr. Ampleforth's favorite sub-contractors. Thus it was that Sylvester was driven out into the street and nearly under a bus by the sight of a blueprint of his incubus, by the thought of his drunken joke thus solemnized.

22

CLOUGH and Sylvester stood on the kerb and looked at each other, while the endless belt of London Transport lumbered past them. Clough said:

"Nearly under there, you were."

"Was I?" Sylvester said, vaguely, indifferently. He was again aware of his surroundings, but still confused. Clough kept a firm hand on his arm and began to move with him back towards the factory. When they stood together in the loading yard Clough released Sylvester and said:

"You in trouble?"

Sylvester shook his head.

"Where d'you live?"

"Lodgings." Sylvester waved vaguely towards the hinterland of Victoria.

"No family?" Sylvester again shook his head. "Ah. Well, we'd better be getting back to work."

As clearly as it was in his nature to do it, Clough had invited Sylvester to come to him for help should he ever need him. But there could be no question of that; Sylvester knew that he was alone and would be alone for ever. The shocks to which he had been subjected were driving him to think as he had never thought before. He looked at Clough with a kind of detached curiosity. What was behind that appearance of ironic benevolence? Did he beat his wife, drink on the quiet, think of himself as the pivot of the world? Sylvester, suddenly and briefly, had a vision of everyone putting on and taking off, with their clothes, a public character which had nothing whatever to do with what they were when quite alone . . . nothing. It wasn't that people wore masks; it was rather as if, as soon as two or three people came into contact with each other, they automatically generated two or three more people who, unlike themselves, were capable of entering into combinations and groups. Sylvester followed Clough down to the workshop, lost the faint track of this line of thought, and shrugged a little, as if to rid his shoulders of an unfriendly touch.

In a small workshop adjoining the welding shop there was a mechanical hacksaw, and Clough set Sylvester to work cutting up lengths of steel. For an hour he fed steel into the machine, and removed and stacked the sawn lengths. The rhythmic buzzing of the saw, the attention required to get all the pieces of the same length, soothed him, and after a while his sense of proportion was restored. Someone, presumably the Government, was making 998. God knew why! But then what of it? It was no business of his. *They had shot him and he was out of it.* And at that Sylvester stopped his work abruptly and saw how foolish he had been: he, and he alone in England, Europe, perhaps the world, was free. Calmly, with deliberation, he began to view his translation into a new and unattached personality, in a different light. Liberty without precedent had been conferred upon him: far from being transformed from a free man into a State unit, he had been made from a bondsman into a man on his own. He had no parents to try and compensate for a botched life of their own, by shaping his; no lover to be a nuisance after the loving was over. He, as no one else, might, like the Jolly Miller, sing:

*"I care for nobody, no not I,
And nobody cares for me."*

And with that thought he did indeed begin to sing that ancient song of a free man, until presently he was aware of Clough standing beside him, grinning amiably, if a shade sardonically, and saying:

"Better, towney?"

An hour earlier Sylvester would have felt the need to offer some explanation, which he had not yet done, for his extraordinary behavior. Now he just looked coolly at the foreman and said:

"About lunch time, isn't it?"

"That's right. Gen'rally, I has sandwiches in, but how about coming out for a bit of steak pie?"

They went out together and into a restaurant for workmen, a hundred yards down the street. It consisted of a long, narrow room with a plain, board floor, whitewashed walls and ceiling, and at the far end, facing the street door, a service hatch giving access to the kitchen. Down each side of the room were deal tables for four, each provided with two benches. The room was full of steam, cigarette smoke and the raw smell of coarse cooking, and crowded with men eating, talking, reading papers. On the wall a radio loudspeaker blared and rattled out a kind of smeared, denatured music. The music was followed by the chatter of a comedian with a north-country accent. The clatter of this machine seemed to absorb the more immediate din of the eating-hell into itself.

Sylvester and Clough sat down at a table already occupied by two lorry drivers, both eating steak pie and cabbage, one listening, the other talking. The listener seemed to signal his passive role by wearing his cap right forward over his eyes, like a man who keeps himself to himself. The talker showed his expansiveness by wearing the cap on the back of his head. The talkative one was saying, as Sylvester sat down next to him:

"The bloody bastard picked me up just past the '*Bald Faced Stag*' an' 'ung on me tail. Three bloody mile 'e stuck there, and me late and likely's not to be fined again. Then we come to the 'ill an' I'm runnin' down on the over-drive, see, gainin' a bit, mind you I'd nine ton on the ol' cow, and our lot don't spend no money on brake lining, and I might be doing p'raps twenty-three, three over the limit. And there was this bleeder still 'anging on, waiting to pick me up when 'e thought I was sufficient over the limit. 'E was a bit too close, see, I could see 'im in the mirror,

young to the job I reckoned, any'ow, I thinks, all right you bastard son of a poxy 'ore, you arst for it and 'ere it comes, sticks out me 'and sudden and jams on the 'and-brake. Bonk, 'e goes, arse over tip into the back of the ol' cow and under. Course, I stops and nips round to see wots wot and there 'e is with the bike all any'ow, 'is crash'at over 'is eye and two busted legs. Laugh!" The raconteur paused, looked thoughtfully at his plate, and said, with withering contempt, "Perlice! I'd stuff 'em." Then he began to eat as fast as his knife, fork, mouth and jaws could work.

Sylvester had listened with interest to his story of an encounter with the police, and now felt drawn to the man. This was *It*, this anarchy. He said:

"I suppose the policeman had his job to do?"

The silent man looked up and stared at him; the other, putting down his fork and gesturing with his knife, said:

"'E didn't 'ave to take *that* job, did 'e, mate?"

"That's right," Clough agreed, with surprising earnestness and was going on when the talkative man said:

"Way I look at it, there's jobs and jobs. Us, we *can't* do no one any 'arm, see, not just carting stuff about like. But perlice, that's diff'rent. Somethin' wrong with a chap as deliberately goes in for that, mate."

"Like politicians," the silent man said, and hastily nipped back behind his knife and fork and plate, as if the words coming out of his mouth had surprised him by getting out at all.

"You said a true word there," his friend took up, however. "'Ere . . . look at this." He took a folded *Daily Image* from his pocket and pointed to a headline. Sylvester read that the Leader of the Opposition was demanding a secret session to discuss the Government's criminal ineptitude in losing control of 998.

"There 'e is, makin' trouble again. Someone oughta stuff 'im and no error. Wot, no crisis? And orf 'e goes talking a fair treat till 'e's bloody well *made* a crisis, and then 'e's 'appy. 'Im an' Itler, both . . ."

Presently the two drivers got up to go, leaving Sylvester much edified and enlightened. There were fewer people in the room now and it was quieter, so that the chatter and rattle from the radio was the more insistent. It came to an end, there was a moment's ringing silence and then a voice said:

"Now I have an SOS." Several men, doubtless those for whom misfortune was in the more immediate future, looked up at the loudspeaker, and the others dropped their voices. "Will Sylvester Rosyth," said the suave, metallic voice, "go at once to fourteen Harrow Terrace, Belgravia, where his sister, Mrs. Betty Singleton Green, is dangerously ill."

Sylvester went white, then resumed full control of himself, in his new mood of indifferent curiosity. He listened calmly to a repetition of the message. There could be no doubt that it was intended by Betty for him, though God knew how she had managed it. He finished his treacle pudding without undue haste, drank up his strong tea, put the money on the table to pay for his meal, rose to his feet. Clough said:

"Sit down. Time to smoke a fag."

"Not for me. I'm taking the afternoon off."

"Now look, chum, you can't do that sort o' thing . . ."

Sylvester grinned at him. He pointed to the *Daily Image*, still on the table. His finger indicated:

"*Gas Workers Strike for extra threepence.*"

"See you later," Sylvester said, and walked out into the street, hailed a taxi, and gave the driver the address he had heard on the radio.

In the cab he gave way to curiosity but repressed any rise of anxiety. He must learn to wait for events with indifference. He paid off the cab driver, rang the bell of the handsome Georgian house and smiled at the parlor maid who, opening the door and glancing at his denims, said:

"Gas?"

"Can I see Lady Betty, please?"

His accent conflicted with his clothes, the girl hesitated, and then Betty herself came into the hall from another room, and exclaimed, "Sylvester!" She dismissed the servant, took Sylvester into a room, closed the door behind them, turned to face him, flung her arms round his neck and burst into tears.

Pleased and gratified though he was by this reception, Sylvester was also surprised. So, to do her justice, was Lady Betty. She hastily choked down the unwonted gush of feeling, restored her calm by repairing her make-up, and apologized.

"I'm sorry to be such a bloody fool. I *knew* you were not dead, but after all I couldn't be sure. I got one of father's tame doctors to give me a certificate, faked up, and tried the B.B.C. stunt. I was all set to wait for hours, days, and here you are, in a few minutes. It was a shock . . . a nice shock."

They sat at opposite ends of a divan. "Well . . ." she said, "tell me . . ." So he told her, with a detachment which made her frown, all that had happened to him, and it sounded as if he were talking about a third person who had had all these adventures, someone in whom Sylvester was mildly interested. Then Betty began to talk, and Sylvester did not listen very carefully. He had quite enjoyed talking about himself to her, but he did not much want to hear about her. She was there, in front of him, very pretty

and fresh and attractively dressed, and that was the important thing: and what she did when she was out of his sight didn't matter at all. However, he could hardly say that, and he appeared to listen amiably, while he watched her mouth, her eyes, edged a little nearer to her, and took her hand at last, where she, who was aware of the effect she was having on him, had left it for his convenience. At last she came to the big item of news to which her narrative had been leading. She told him what she knew of the plans for 998. He nodded absently to the insistence in her tone, the demand for his utmost, cool attention.

"No, but really, Sylvester, you *must* listen. I tell you they . . . they're using your thing, your joke for . . . but I just don't understand . . . Syl . . ."

Her appeal was cut short by a kiss on the lips. She jerked her head back——

"But, dearest Sylvester, 998 . . ."

"Bother 998," he said, "this is much more fun . . ."

Betty stood up and looked annoyed. It was all right to know that she still had power over him, but her terrific story had made absolutely no impression, he did not care a damn; and he must be made to care. After all, fond though she was of him, she wanted him as a man of importance, not as a man who refused to take anything, even his own aggrandizement, seriously.

"Look, Sylvester," she said, "we're being awfully silly. And it won't do. There are things to discuss, to be done . . ."

"Do sit down again," he said, "and don't fuss."

He got up and put his arms round her and tried to kiss her, but she twisted her head away from him and said angrily:

"Damn it, don't maul me about, I don't feel like it."

He let her go at that and looked at her coolly.

"All right, Betty," he said, "what is it you want?"

There was something self-possessed, even formidable, in his manner, which was new, and which startled her.

"I didn't mean——," she began a half-apology, and then, almost desperately:

"Sylvester. Do you remember asking me to marry you?"

"Indeed I do," he replied, "several times." If Betty noticed the faint flavor of irony in his voice, she ignored it. She said, earnestly:

"I'll marry you tomorrow if you still want to. But *please* not all this—this silly petting, with the world going mad about our ears."

Sylvester seemed to be paying her close attention, his expression was one of elaborate respect.

"What," he said, with ponderous gravity, "what is your idea of a more suitable attitude?"

She could not miss the sneer this time, and flushed; bit her lip, and decided to persevere.

"We've got to—to do something about this thing of yours. To take control. After all, it *is* your responsibility. And I'm only too willing to do all *I* can——"

Sylvester was still attending closely to what she said, and he was keeping his eyes upon hers with exaggerated care. Quite suddenly his own face grew grim, and much older.

"I'm sure you are," he said and, before she could go on, "I'm afraid I have to get back to my work. But you may count on me to give the most careful thought to what you have said."

He moved to the door. Betty said, hastily:

"You'll come back tonight—for a proper talk?"

"Thank you," he said. And he went out into the hall and into the street.

Betty did not follow him. She realized that she had blundered: you could not stop a man making love to you

without becoming the victim of his frustration-born ill temper. But his mood of quiet ferocity would not last; he wanted her too badly. The frivolous proposals he had made to her at Rosyth had, after all, expressed a serious desire. He would come back, if not that night, then the next. She was sure of it.

23

SYLVESTER walked away from Betty's house and caught a bus which would take him back to Victoria. He did not want to go back to the factory, but he felt strongly moved to give some explanation to Clough. And there was rising in his mind and heart a desire like a parching thirst for something real and reliable, something which would nourish him. There was nothing in this town through which his bus lumbered, no strength he could draw from it; he suspected its reality, it was no good for anything but dreams and nightmares, it was an accident, a joke like 998, without a shadow of meaning.

His neighbor, who was staring out of the window of the bus, said:

"They don't seem to be doing much about rebuilding."

"They," said Sylvester, "who?"

The man gave him a sharp look. "Know what I mean," he said, huffily; he edged away from Sylvester; you never knew, he might start talking politics.

But Sylvester did *not* know what the other man meant,

and suddenly realized that he never had known. He suspected that *They*, like God, might not exist. That was it: somehow or other this vast, squalid, miserable sprawl of dirty brick had come into existence by accident, was kept going and spreading its foulness over fair acres by everyone believing that the other chap was one of *Them*, that someone had a plan and knew what he was doing. But really there was nobody, no plan, nothing real about the place at all . . . a dream it was, a nightmare.

Sylvester got off the bus and went into the restaurant where he and Clough had had lunch. He sat there and drank cups of coffee and let his mind wander in his past until he found something real for him to dwell with. And he began, quite suddenly, to find himself remembering Kentish coppices, a childhood in the woods, days spent gathering great baskets of primroses, making them into bunches to sell to motorists at the roadside. He shut his eyes and saw, with a vividness which astonished him, the seasons pass before him, seasons which in his suburban home had barely been noticed: primroses stood for spring, and fruits for summer. There had been fruit-picking, cherries, plums and apples. Whence, he wondered, with a sense of profound surprise and relief, did these memories come to him? And he recalled that they belonged to a brief interlude of serious poverty in his family when, for a year, the shop had been shut and they had gone to stay with and work for his father's brother, who had a small farm in east Kent.

Sylvester remembered the evenings, the open doors of squat, tarred huts in which the fruit pickers lived, the voices calling each other plaintively across the twilight orchards which still seemed to hum and resonate faintly with the sounds of the day's work with ladders and baskets. It was amazing how clearly he recalled here a voice, there a

face: voices and faces connected with no name, with no one he could recall knowing.

This, at least then, was real. He said, aloud, startling the only other occupant of the café, a lorry driver who was filling in a football coupon:

"That's where I'll go."

It was nearly five. Sylvester went out into the street, to hang about outside Brindlehough's premises until he saw the sturdy form of Clough come out from under the arch, alone. He walked behind the foreman until they were well away from the factory, and then caught up with him and said:

"I say, Clough!"

Clough stopped and turned.

"Well?"

"Look, I'm sorry. I don't care twopence about Brindlehough, but I wanted to tell you . . ."

"What?"

"That thing you're making. I can't stay and do that . . . I'm clearing out. I know what it is. I can't have anything to do with it."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you that!" Sylvester cried; and his philosophy, made so quickly and shoddily out of the consolations of indifference and the promises of his remembered childhood, was revealed, in the despair of his voice, as the ephemeral thing that it was. There was so much despair, so much sullen anger in his *I can't tell you that*, that Clough shed his reserve, his reproachful coolness, and said:

"You know best, mate."

He fumbled in his pocket, brought out an envelope, and gave it to Sylvester.

"Address. If ever I can help . . ."

Sylvester took the envelope, the two men shook hands and parted without another word.

Very early on the following morning Sylvester went to Cannon Street. He studied the destination board until it seemed to him that a name, that of a halt not far from Canterbury, had once been familiar. He bought a ticket to that place, caught the train, and sat in a corner of the carriage allowing idle thoughts, idle impressions to carry him forward, as the train did. But from time to time, struggle as he did, he found himself considering with a profound and depressing sense of responsibility, what Betty had told him and what he himself knew about 998. Again and again, as the train rambled through the suburbs, as it crossed the iron bridge between Rochester and Chatham, offering him ships and boats as a distraction, causing his heart to jump and tears of nostalgia to come into his eyes at the sight of a destroyer; as it plunged into the heart-moving beauty of flowering orchards, he felt a cold, leaden weight, like an undigested meal of suet pudding in his stomach, tasted a sourness in his mouth, and, seeking a cause, found it in his mind's preoccupation with 998.

The halt, when Sylvester alighted from the train, stood in the midst of apple orchards in flower, a spectacle of such beauty that he forgot his anxieties and almost fell over his own feet, trying to get out of the station while his eyes were otherwise engaged. He emerged into a graveled yard leading to a small road. He had no idea what to do next, but stood absorbing peace, his bag in his hand, his coat over his arm, in a mood to wait for something to happen, to be fed, albeit he was no prophet, by the ravens.

There was an enormous Rolls-Royce in the yard, and an elderly chauffeur standing by the door looking nervously towards the station entrance whence presently shot

forth, at a trot, a small, grey, thin-faced man of sixty. The man darted a look at Sylvester, which was certainly intended to be penetrating, and then made for his car, to be deferentially tucked in by his servant. He said something sharp to the old chauffeur, who looked very awkward in a shabby livery which seemed to have been cut for another man. He shambled over to Sylvester and said, with a strong Lancashire accent:

"Want a lift anywhere? No buses from here till seven."

"It's kind of your . . . of you," Sylvester said, "but the fact is I don't know where I'm going."

The chauffeur appeared surprised, hesitated and went back to report to his employer who, putting his head out of the window, called peevishly:

"Young man! Young man!"

Sylvester went over to him, but had hardly got within range for polite conversation when the old man burst out, avidly curious, shrilly impatient:

"What do you mean, you don't know where you're going?"

"I'm looking for a job," Sylvester said, taking in the thin, quivering nose, the turned-down, codlike mouth and bilious eyes, with distaste.

Evidently casualness, want of order, were extremely offensive to the old gentleman, who said, as if he were thoroughly accustomed to hustling other people's lives into order:

"Then you'll want the Labor Exchange in Ashford. My house is on the way. Get in."

Sylvester, who did not care which way he went, got in beside the chauffeur. They drove for ten minutes between apple orchards in flower; hop gardens, where the elaborate and fascinating pattern of poles and strings was still

uncompleted by the green vines, only just sprouting from the soil. In the cherry orchards, the flowers were fading, the fields of winter wheat were lovely in tender green. Here and there great clouds of white hawthorn glorified the tall hedges, and in the meadows sleek herds of cows, beige Jerseys, red Shorthorns, black and white Friesians raised ponderous heads and gentle eyes to watch the car slide past. In close-bitten pastures fat sheep and half-grown lambs, whose infantile gambols were already growing stiff and awkward, shied from their passage. In the background rose, in one direction, wooded hills, in the other, dark against the high, pale sky, the bare sweep of the Downs. This was a paradise country, a Canaan of milk and honey, fruit and fat cattle.

The window which isolated Sylvester and the chauffeur from the upper classes was impatiently scrabbled open. The owner of the car had moved on to a strapontin, and now addressed Sylvester, who politely restrained himself from starting away from the wrinkled, yellow face thrust almost into his own.

"What sort of job?" the old man asked. Sylvester considered him, found himself indifferent and unready to show enthusiasm.

"I don't mind, sir, I'm pretty handy."

"Gardening, cars, jobs about the house?"

"That would suit me," Sylvester agreed, easily; he seemed to himself to be hardly concerned; he had an entire and irrational indifference to the future.

"Give you a fortnight's trial," the old man snapped. "Fifty shillings a week, and all found." Sylvester smiled into the cloudy little eyes.

"Three pounds, then," the old man snarled, "three pounds and not a penny more."

Sylvester nodded and said:

"Thank you."

The old man shut the window. Surprisingly, as if a draper's dummy had burst into speech, the chauffeur spoke out of the side of his mouth:

"Don't you do it, chum."

"Eh?"

"He's a bastard. I been with him fifteen years, so I ought to know."

"Why haven't you left, then?"

"And do what? I'm sixty."

"Oh. Well, I'll give it a trial."

"I've warned you."

The chauffeur fell silent, an image resuming its natural impassivity. He swung the big car into a neglected drive between tall gate posts, beside which an ugly Victorian lodge crumbled into decay.

"What's his name?" Sylvester asked.

"Brophy. Sir Isador Brophy."

Sylvester was vaguely aware that he had read the name, but it meant nothing to him.

24

THE Government which was confronted by the accomplished fact of Sir Branson Rose's acceptance of the Agrarian offer was, happily, free from the old and absurd control by the electorate through its representatives. To the Liberal Party had belonged the honor of breaking

the power of the House of Lords, but all Parties shared the work of destroying the power of the Commons. The development of the system of party had given the Executive a hold over its supporters far more effective than that possessed by the most cynical eighteenth-century dispenser of bribes or patronage. The coveted letters M.P., and the thousand a year which went with them, were held, as was the ultimate chance of office, upon condition of unquestioning loyalty: let any member speak or vote in a manner displeasing to his party, and, when the next election came round, he would find no organized mob to propose, second and elect him. Four hundred members spoke and voted as they knew they must, and their three hundred and fifty odd opponents could do nothing but wait for their turn to do what *they* were told. Government by Parliament had become a farce, but a useful farce, since it continued to give to a people who fancied themselves free, the illusion that they were guarding their freedom.

The Government was composed of benevolent and simple men always ready to take advice, provided the advice did not come from a Member of Parliament. They knew, as well as any other citizen who read the better sort of reviews, that the only serious enemy of the peace and security which they sought to give to their own and to alien peoples, was Fear. ("You put that gun down and then we'll talk." "What, and leave you holding that stick?") And now, here was Sir Lewis Lassen, a man they all respected, with Sir Branson Rose modestly in the background, bringing them what would give their people, and any others who liked to do business with Agraria, that freedom from fear which the great F. D. Roosevelt had, perhaps a shade illogically, tried to promote by hounding the Germans into the ultimate sullenness of despair, and

making the most terrifying instrument of horror which his scientists could devise.

As for Sir Lewis Lassen, he had listened in silence to Sir Branson's report: nor, when the Ambassador had done, did he make any comment beyond a nod of understanding. Was he to bring this enthusiastic booby with his fantastic plan to the Minister's notice? Well, why not? Had not Rome built an Empire on nothing but the weakness of her enemies? Were not social systems, great States, founded upon mere words without any meaning whatever? Democracy, for example: in Britain government by a handful of Trade Union officials; in America by a handful of bankers; in Russia by a handful of technicians; in France . . . but Sir Lewis shrank from contemplating that final example. Freedom from fear, he was reflecting, must always rest upon illusion, the illusion that some physical barrier, some social habit will be too much for the ferocious malignancy of the other side's human nature. The complacency, Sir Lewis thought, the complacency of sensible men, good Protestant men intent upon filling their stomachs and applauding the athletes of sport and art, is based upon the certainty that Faith will not even move a molehill, much less a mountain. But mountains were moving, the illusions which had supported freedom from fear were all broken down. What could one put in their place but such another? It was, even, his clear duty to do so.

"You had better see the Minister," Sir Lewis said, at last.

The Minister was a man of whom people say, after a discussion of his character and capacities, "Still, he's very level-headed," or, "Well, but he's very good-hearted." This was a fact: brought up on the nursery tale of the Seven Dwarfs of good sense, self-help, regard for the Ten Commandments, education, free trade, high-minded

colonization and science, all governed by the Snow White of kindness, who were to usher in the millennium, the Minister had neglected to read history. How was he to know that there was anything unusual in the pacific inter-regnum of the Victorian era? If he had heard of Spengler he believed him to be the author of an undesirable novel about high life called *Le Rouge et le Noir*. He may perhaps have heard of Arnold Toynbee, but he certainly would not have had time to read that author's work. His own *Times* confused him, he could not make out what was happening: his international smiles were met by scowls; his extended hand bitten; his earnestly held opinion that the chaps in the local, drinking a pint of mild and bitter and reading the strip cartoons in the *Image* were the salt, nay, the very cream of the earth, was incomprehensibly ignored by the Chanceries of Italy and China, Argentine and (*et tu, Brute!*) the United States; and thus ceased to be viable as a Foreign Policy.

To him, then, the words uttered by Sir Branson, by Sir Lewis, ultimately by Dr. Melli in person, invited and flown to Britain secretly and in all haste, were very sweet. At long last one of the Seven Dwarfs, Science, was doing what, for so long and with decreasing hope, had been expected of him: bringing in the time of peace and goodwill, instead of smashing up the physical and spiritual furniture.

The Minister became lyrical as he addressed the Cabinet, Sir Branson, Sir Lewis and Dr. Melli seated behind him as his supporters. He made them see his vision of small, round turrets of bright metal, surmounted by their strange antennae in perspex domes, lining the coasts of their country from Land's End to Plymouth, from Plymouth to Southampton, thence to Dover, then north along the east coast, round Scotland, looping westward

to include all Ulster, joining the line again at Holyhead, then on to Fishguard and so round the Bristol Channel and back to Land's End.

There were objectors, those who feared lest America be offended by the guarding of the west as well as the east coast. Let us, they said, cover the east but leave the west as open as our hearts to American friendship. The objection was set aside by the Prime Minister himself: *his* policy was, all round, or nothing. It might, although he did not say so in so many words, be safer to offend a nation governed by industrial lobbies, than one governed by principle, however disagreeable. The latter's actions could be forecast, the former's were as incalculable as the personal whims of the tycoons which gave rise to them.

The meeting went on to debate the cost of installation. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, a man much given to quoting the Gospels, had not long since found a thousand millions sterling to buy atom bombs, but now declared it impossible to find fifty millions to buy 998. His grounds, as they generally were, were religious. Was there not something un-Protestant, un-Anglican, perhaps even un-Christian in skulking behind an impenetrable barrier of security? He leaned eagerly towards his colleagues gathered about the table, his glossy nose and prominent white teeth making spots of hypnotic light in the somberness of the room, and said, solemnly, "I bring not Peace, but a Sword," brandishing the fountain pen in his hand with warlike elegance. But if this Christian statesman was in a fighting mood, so was his chief who was unmoved even by the twenty minutes of closely reasoned argument which followed and which, rudely and tersely, he summed up by saying:

"You mean that a badly frightened people is easier to govern?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you meant it."

It was, indeed, fortunate that the Prime Minister was an old man looking forward to nothing so much as his retirement: fortunate, at least, for Dr. Melli's scheme and for the well-being of the world's people.

Dr. Melli spoke, Sir Branson interpreting: the installation and manning of the posts could be completed in one month; meanwhile it was his intention, his Government's intention, to offer the same security to every nation in the world, regardless of creed, ideology, or color.

During that month much rumor but little truth was spoken concerning the strange works which were going forward in the coastal regions. Letters about the disturbance of bird sanctuaries, of playgrounds, of bombing ranges, were printed in *The Times*. Those of the Press lords who knew something of the truth were upon their honor not to print it. At the end of the month the Prime Minister was entertained to a banquet by the Worshipful Company of Vintners, Brewers and Distillers. It was an annual event, a century established, or the Worshipful Company might have discontinued it during the office of a man they disliked, not for himself, since they had all, as it were, been at the same school; but for his policy, his treachery.

The vintners, brewers and distillers received him, then, with no more than cool politeness, a mood most admirably expressed by their Grand Master, Sir Isador Brophy. Yet to him the Prime Minister was almost deferentially polite, thereby obeying the passionate adjurations of his Chancellor of the Exchequer.

"For Heaven's sake," the latter had urged, and this with him was no mere figure of speech, "for Heaven's sake," said the strict abstainer from alcohol, "be nice to

Brophy. He's exporting a hundred million dollars' worth of his rot gut to the States every year. It's not too much to say that our economic survival depends upon his poison."

And indeed, as the Prime Minister well knew, his Chancellor would almost have caused to be assassinated any American Senator moving a return to the Volstead Act.

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THAT fluid, for which Americans from Maine to Florida and from Florida to California apparently struggled at the bars of their saloons, and to which the Chancellor had referred so disrespectfully as rot gut, was the whisky known as *Lomond Nectar* and advertised as the Finest Blended Ten Year Old Scotch Whisky. It was, in fact, distilled in Slough, and the really great value of Sir Isador, or rather his chemists, to their country was in the economy of barley which their secret methods made possible. It was said that that cereal was mixed judiciously with spoiled wheat, blighted potatoes, horse beans and a little prime oak sawdust. All that is certain is that very little barley was consumed and a very large quantity of spirit made, and that that spirit, not, it is true, found palatable by Europeans, was drunk by large numbers of Americans without any violent or immediate harm to their persons.

The Prime Minister was, then, anxious to keep his host's good opinion.

"I have," he said, confidentially, "chosen this occasion to make an announcement of the first importance. I think I may call it the most important news in our lifetime."

Sir Isador was accustomed to political hyperbole: he gave his guest a sharp look.

"It's as well," he said, "some of us had some hard questions to put."

A great brewer, related to half the noble families in Britain and even to several Trade Union leaders, had joined them, and heard the last remark.

"Here's one," he said. "What the Hell are the War Office doing sticking up those bloody little tin martello towers all over my duck marshes?" The statesman smiled on his questioner with easy self-control: he was accustomed to be baited by men who made their living out of it. He said:

"You'll hear the answer before the evening is out."

Dinner, announced a liveried servant in a voice of doom, was served. The Prime Minister, tirelessly jaunty, and outwardly urbane and even entertained, inwardly weary unto death, began on the turtle soup. It was a dish which he detested; indeed, his public eating was not the least of the sacrifices which he made for his country, or to his ambition, for he was a man of simple tastes used, when at home, to living on eggs and fruit from his garden. The appearance of satisfaction with which he ate his way through the monstrous meals served to him by the City, which disliked his principles and obstructed his policies, did much credit to his caliber as a man of political mettle.

Sir Isador himself proposed the health of their distinguished guest, in a speech which lasted half an hour. The Prime Minister listened with his eyes on the crystal goblet which he spun and spun in his nervous fingers, his face changing its expression in accordance with the

requirements of Sir Isador's words in perfect obedience to a faculty which would have made the fortune of an actor. He was thinking that the speech closely, too closely, resembled one of Mark Antony's. Sir Isador's speech was, in fact, an ill-bred and angry polemic against his guest's government, larded with off-hand apologies in the form of conventional personal tributes. Brutus, it seemed, though an honorable man, was an unmitigated scoundrel. The Minister was thinking, "What an ill-conditioned little creature it is," and smiling at the distiller as he sat down, his small, bilious eyes and little thin mouth wet, his expression complacent at the sound of applause.

The Premier rose to reply and, despite the warnings of his lieutenant in the Cabinet, could not forbear a self-defensive thrust.

"I feel," he said, looking round with distaste at all the swollen red faces, small cold eyes, bulging white shirts, "I feel that Sir Isador has not quite completed what he had to say. A peroration is wanting, and it might, perhaps, have taken the form of, 'Now let it work! Mischief, thou art afoot!'" He paused, glanced down at his notes, but noticed that there were three or four literates among his company, for some blushed. But Sir Isador was not of their number.

"Your Grand Master," the Premier continued, "while he paid me certain tributes, for which I thank him, has not hesitated . . . and indeed he is a man celebrated for courage . . . to rebuke me for, among other things, allowing a foreign power to obtain control of that allegedly most perfect of defensive weapons, the mysterious device known as 998. My Lords and Gentlemen, we are not to blame. We cannot yet keep tabs on what goes on in the mind of an inventor. We do our best to deserve the trust of our geniuses, but we cannot command it. The inventor

of this device deserted his duty, and gave his invention to a foreign power. He was brought back to this country, he submitted voluntarily to the stern discipline of the Service which he had disgraced, was court-martialed, and . . . executed. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*. But, my lords and gentlemen, Sir Isador . . . his work is *not* lost to us."

That enlivened them: they shook off the torpor of turtle soup and sherry, turbot and hock, saddle of mutton and claret, gâteau St. Honoré and champagne, port, brandy . . . they sat up in their chairs, putting their weight of flesh squarely on well-covered hams, and waited eagerly for the speaker to continue, which he did, making use of the complaint made to him by the duck-shooting ornament of the beerage, to introduce and tell what he had to tell.

When he had done, most of them, with the weight of terror lifted from their hides and houses, shouted and clapped, stamped and thumped the table in their excitement, sprang ponderously to their feet, revealed in the wide laughter of their mouths, the light in their eyes, how they had been in the grip of fear. For the old man who had worked this miracle and who watched it quietly, here was the justification of his stand in the Cabinet. These men, shrewd, hard-mouthed, were in a mood to make friends with the veriest bolshevik, could afford to be brave.

There were, the Premier noted, others who were not much moved, those who, perhaps, had had less to lose, or were not imaginative, or were ferociously courageous, and their applause was reserved, a mere gesture of casual courtesy. Sir Isador was among them, and in his disapproval he was, as the statesman knew, consistent. The Grand Master looked round upon his fellow liverymen, now on their feet and crowding round their guest to

provoke and hear his reiterated assurance that they were safe from atom bombs, bacteria bombs, from the approach of any hostile engine whatever to the shores of their country. Yes, they and theirs were safe and it was all they thought of. But the Prime Minister was watching Sir Isador, following his thoughts, watching his little eyes, dull with spleen as much as with bile. There was no approval there.

Sir Isador was considering what an opportunity had been thrown away. Of what use was this wretched contrivance if all were to have it and others control it? Not thus would his hero, the stout Leader of the Opposition, have handled this matter. To think that Britain, Sir Isador's Britain, with the military integrity of the Channel restored and reinforced by an impenetrable electronic barrier, might at last have fulfilled her destiny of giving laws to and taking profits from the whole world, the whole cringing world!

For Sir Isador was a patriot; it was, indeed, for his patriotism that he had received his Order of Knighthood and now wore about his scrawny neck and narrow, stooping shoulders the weighty collar of that Order. When other men had wrung their hands over the plight of the country paralyzed by a transport strike of unprecedented totality, Isador Brophy had freely and without thought of payment unstopped the cocks of his thousands of hogsheads, and whisky had flowed, like milk and honey in Canaan, to an army of Public School strike breakers. Patriotism had been his motive; and patriotism it was that now relaxed his hand as he offered it, reluctantly, with insolent carelessness, to the departing guest, so that the hand remained flabby and was a rebuke, a reproach in the Premier's professionally hearty clasp.

SIR ISADOR's house was called *Glencoe*, and it had twenty rooms, five turrets, eleven dormer windows, some stucco, some timbering and a Palladian porch. A whimsical tenant might have carried this off by boasting that he lived in the most ridiculous house in the country, but Sir Isador and his wife took it seriously. They called their house *a Place*, its ten acres of coarse grass and thistles *a Park*; and insisted that the gardens were some of the finest in the country, though the flea beetle ate the cabbages, the wasps had the peaches, and even the rhododendrons, plant symbolic of financial success, were dwarfed and brown in that infertile soil.

Lady Brophy was not a happy woman: her Isador had married her in unpropitious circumstances: as a young clerk in the business which he subsequently rose to control, some said by industry, others by blackmail, he had been kept late at the office one night, and had his peace of mind disturbed by the six inches of white cotton stocking displayed by a youngish charwoman of the several who came to clean the offices. The tantalizing seductiveness of the white stocking had overcome the young man's prudence, and he had first talked to and then made love to the whey-faced girl who, being seriously undernourished and chronically tired had offered little resistance even to so puny and clumsy a ravisher.

Nevertheless the girl, whose name was Emma, knew her rights; and when she found herself with child she had insisted that Isador marry her or take the consequences of

being reported to his employers. She might be weak in everything else, but she was a respectable girl and it had stood her in good stead that she believed her father, a surly and occasionally drunken ex-soldier, would rather have seen her dead at his feet than an unmarried mother.

Emma had been a loyal wife, straining her powers to the limit in order to keep up with Isador's progress in the world. And she had, up to a point, succeeded.

The household in which Sylvester found himself was a small one for so large a mansion, consisting of Sir Isador and his lady, a middle-aged cook-general, and the silent and stricken chauffeur-handyman whose name was Newman. These, Lady Brophy said, were not the times for spaciousness of living; moreover, with taxation what it was, they could not afford to live in style. She would, poor woman, have willingly spent the money in keeping her house in proper and decent style, had she known how to get it out of Sir Isador; but he expected her and his other servants to maintain his establishment like that of a magnate, on an allowance which would have supported a suburban villa and a rod of kitchen garden.

Sylvester was given a small, white cell of a room, with a fine view across the downs. The routine of his new life, prescribed by his employer, was simple: he ate in the kitchen and did what Newman told him to do. He washed and polished the Rolls-Royce; he dug, he hoed and he weeded. He stoked the kitchen range and the boiler. He worked for as long as work was required of him, without regard to any rights which he might possess, and he did his work with an earnest thoroughness and speed which had nothing to do with his conscience as an employed person, but everything to do with the despairing determination which now possessed him to *make* Sylvester Grant, in order that he might forget Sylvester Green.

That determination was no product of loyalty to Admiral St. Just. Nor was it that he felt this course of making a new man the only one left to him, for it was perfectly clear that he had only to submit himself to Betty, and thereby present her father with the most catastrophically sensational news story of the luster, perhaps the decade, to become Sylvester Green again, under powerful protection, and with all the importance of a really troublesome busybody.

No; simply, he was terrified at the transformation of his joke. No priest, accustomed to employ his skill as a ventriloquist to make an idol of stone into an oracle of spirit, could have been more frightened had his puppet God addressed him without any help from himself. Day by day, as Sylvester followed in the Press, in the conversation of his fellow-servants and his employers, and in what he heard in the village, the progress of the 998 Security Scheme; of the Corps of Neutrals; of the meteoric rise to world dominance of Andreas Melli, so, day after day, he shrank more and more from taking any responsibility for what was happening. Sylvester was no Darwin, to overturn the faith of a generation in cosy, family English; no Freud to say to his fellow citizens, with a kind of finicking courtesy, *This is the truth concerning the rubbish you believe in*. He was modest, and his modesty was even more immediate than his candor.

Sylvester began, indeed, to doubt his own knowledge; he had, after all, been brought up to a democracy, to the doctrine that fifty million people can't be wrong. He considered whether perhaps some enormously improbable coincidence had not wrought an apparent miracle: could he be certain that in the composition of wheels, rods and balls which he had made, as a joke, some brilliantly gifted Agrarian physicist had not recognized, by a flash of in-

sight, the very arrangement of parts necessary to radiate massively concentrated beams of power? The papers were writing of a certain mystery man, Hyman Pflumbaum, ex-Russian, ex-American, said to be a paragon and nonpareil of electricians: such a man might, perhaps . . . ? But Sylvester did not believe any such thing, the notion merely served to give form to his reassuring self-doubt.

Nevertheless, in the more frequent moments of integrity, when no doubts could make headway against his certain knowledge that 998 was a fraud, Sylvester was afraid. He saw a vast international structure of security being raised on vacuous foundations. It was his duty to warn his countrymen that they were raising a wall on a foundation of sand; he shrank from that responsibility, and so he would repudiate his dead past and, on however humble a scale, with however sad a heart, accompanied by whatever debilitating broodings, *make* Sylvester Grant.

Daily he dug incredible numbers of rods of soil, making a tilth of such equal level and even texture that the scowl was removed from Sir Isador's face, the scowl with which, on principle, he examined any work done for him by another. He polished the Rolls-Royce until it shone again. When Lady Brophy was in despair because the cook's wireless, which blared from breakfast until supper time, had fallen silent, so that the cook grew apathetic, unable to do her work, casting frightened glances about her as the unfamiliar and sinister silence closed in . . . then it was that Sylvester came forward and repaired the apparatus, restored the circulation of the household life. He did everything willingly and well, and without a trace of apparent interest, expression or fatigue. There was, indeed, something almost forbidding in his automatism, the freedom of his face from smiles or frowns. It saved him from being imposed upon: he had heard Lady Brophy wonder

to her husband whether she might ask Sylvester to clean the silver. She never got so far as asking him, but she could safely have done so. He would have fastened her stays for her with equal indifference: who was Sylvester Grant to stand upon dignity?

But for all his application to his role, Sylvester made no progress against the heart and the mind of Sylvester Green: he had hoped to pass the twenty-four hours of each day in unremitting toil and the sleep of exhaustion. But he was not exhausted, nor even much tired, and for the first time in his life he could not sleep. Or, when he slept, one dream recurred, time after time, to wake him in a state of sweating fear. In this dream he saw the gigantic figure of a naval officer—sometimes Captain Owbridge, at others Admiral St. Just or a compound of the two—rocking with tearful laughter at the spectacle of a pawnbroker's sign being wheeled, like a baby, in a perambulator; about the men and objects in his dream there whirled a snow storm of papers. And suddenly the tears of laughter on the officer's face were tears of something else, of a profound and hopeless misery. The spectacle of Admiral St. Just weeping like a broken-hearted child, filled him with indescribable terror.

Sylvester grew so afraid of this dream that he gave up trying to sleep as soon and as long as possible. He had no books of his own but Sir Isador had a library never used, and Sylvester was given permission to take books from it, on condition of paying for any damage he might do to them. It was with pain that Lady Brophy saw these incomprehensible treasures of her house being taken from the neat and dusted rows and actually used; but her husband, if only to disoblige her, over-ruled her. Sylvester did not choose books but took them at random and read them mechanically, letting the words run past his eyes

and hypnotize him into some kind of mental ease. But the exertion was nothing, consumed none of the feverish and undirected energy which possessed him. He took to going for long walks in the twilight and the darkness, through the orchards beautiful in flower, over the Downs in the teeth of the wind, to see, from some vast ridge of chalk, the last glint of the sun, or the first shimmer of the moon, reflected back to him by the far, silver horizon of the sea.

He grew more and more unhappy until he could no longer bear his own company, and seeking, in desperation, that of his fellows, discovered that half his trouble had been loneliness. The people at *Glencoe* did not count with him, for he had deceived them. The strangers he now sought took him at his face value. He asked himself—after he had experienced on two evenings in succession the warming comfort of the local pub, of conversation with farm hands, of a game of darts and a glass of ale—how he could, he alone and unaided, hope to establish the substantial being of the paper-born Sylvester Grant? Even the unimpaired identity of his public-house acquaintances, who had suffered no such transformation as had destroyed *his* personality, required the constant support of company. A man exists by virtue of the belief of others in his reality; a solitary has no being, and the self-regarding mystic, lost in God or money, woman or idea, loses his identity.

So Sylvester sought company and human reassurance, and this had another and even more important consequence: he began to understand the effects which the 998 scheme was having upon his fellow citizens. Was it not evidence, however trivial, of the shedding of the huge burden of arms by the relieved community, that beer was down in price and up in gravity; that sixpence had been knocked off cigarettes? And these were but some outward and economic signs of an inward state growing towards

grace. The men he talked to in the pub of an evening spoke well of Frenchmen, Germans and Russians; they were good fellows, all were sure of that. The denizens of Sylvester's pub had even stopped abusing the Americans. And either these people were taking their tone from the Press; or the Press reported them with some truth. In leaders growing daily warmer in tone, the Government was urged to a bolder friendliness, a more generous candor towards all Foreign Powers.

True, these leaders were but awkwardly written: it was not to be expected that men who, during half a lifetime, had urged upon their rulers, in vulgar but nervous prose, every kind of vicious meanness and rapacity in foreign affairs, should quickly and easily take on the manners of journalistic archangels. But they were doing their best; not every Russian or Chinese leader of the people was apostrophized as a matricidal cannibal; not every oligarch with atrocious antecedents was canonized on the City pages. Nor was every slight outbreak of industrial ill temper made the excuse for rabble-rousing screams of sabotage and bloody conspiracy.

And Sylvester, strolling home to his white room through the soft May moonlight and the almond-scented air of cherry orchards, wondered and wondered until one night he stopped in his tracks, gazed in rapture at the great crown of pendant flowers above his head, like a wide-flung fountain of quicksilver in the moonlight, struck the warm bole of the cherry tree with his open hand, and exclaimed aloud:

"By God! I've worked a miracle!"

And he swore on oath to stand by the myth he had unwittingly created.

AT Lord Singleton's annual garden party, the state of mind of the guests was such that the oldest among them went from group to group in a condition of bemused happiness. The world of their youth, when, as they recalled it, men had not been denatured by the black shadow of fear, was, almost incredibly, restored to them in their last years.

"You see what we meant?" they said to their juniors, "you see what we've been trying to explain?"

The guests were high-spirited and there was much laughter: they felt, like the Foreign Minister, who was present and the focus of much congratulation, that Science had pulled off its trick at last, had performed as it had once been expected to perform. All of them had seen in the newspapers the neat little charts and maps which showed how they were protected; and their resultant mood was the same as that of their millions of fellow citizens.

In the case of great scientific innovations which are not understood by laymen, some single aspect of the idea is seized upon, one phrase which comes to stand for the whole thing. In the case of 998, this phrase was *Polar Diagram*. These words, and the diagrams themselves, a month ago meaningless to all but a few specialists, were now universally discussed and even understood. Old ladies, children, greengrocers, bus conductors, house painters and clergymen paused in their work or play to explain to each other how it was that the polar diagram of the 998

post at Shoeburyness overlapped that of the North Foreland installation; and why, owing to a gap between the polar diagram peripheries of the Land's End and the St. Gowan's Head posts, it had been necessary to mount a 998 on piles sunk in the Bristol Channel.

There was no attempt to conceal the posts. Their appearance had already been made familiar to everyone in Press photographs and on the screen of cinemas and television receivers. But in any case the posts could be, and at first overwhelmingly were, visited at every convenient point along the coast. They stood up boldly, bright, silvery metal cylinders topped by perspex domes like bowler hats. Alongside each post was a bungalow for the two operators, the whole standing in a plot of land generally planted as a flower and vegetable garden, and fenced in with wire.

During the first weeks crowds of the curious stood at the fences of all but the remotest posts and stared, still and patient, although there was nothing much to be seen. A stir of movement would ripple over the crowd when one of the white-uniformed operators, member of the 998 Corps of Neutrals, came out for a breath of air. Very soon these operators, like animals in a zoo, developed a technique for ignoring their audiences; and this aloofness enhanced the mysterious prestige of their work.

To return to Lord Singleton's party: in an arbor of roses in one corner of the grounds, a group of the more serious guests had formed about Mr. Agar Simes who, now the principal journalistic authority on 998, was talking fluently of Agraria and his tour of the 998 frontiers. Lady Betty listened, with a small, sardonic smile on her lips, a smile which made one of her guests, Admiral St. Just, uneasy. Sir Isador Brophy was there, scowling. Dr. Steven-Blair waited eagerly for Simes to refer some scientific question to him, so that he might take his turn at spellbinding. But

the rest of Simes' audience was completely held, silently respectful and attentive.

"No people, great or small," he was saying, "has ever made such a contribution to civilization, to peace of mind, to decent behavior. We are all growing magnanimous. It's a fact that, feeling safe, we can be generous and brave. The results, in a few weeks, are amazing . . . amazing!"

"France . . ." prompted a soldierly-looking man.

"France," repeated Mr. Simes, "a miracle has been wrought in France. You know, of course, that the French insisted on having posts every twenty yards, and demanded that the Americans ought to pay for them?"

"Ridiculously unnecessary!" Dr. Steven-Blair interrupted, "the polar diagram of the . . ."

"So I understand. From the air it looks for all the world like the delivery belt of a pepper-pot factory. But the effect! Stupendous! French and Germans fraternizing, smiling passport officials shrugging shoulders over fifty irregularities . . ."

Mr. Simes continued to describe his tour. There were, of course, still black spots: the frontier between Eire and Ulster was disturbed, for the Eirean theocrats had, pending a Papal encyclical, refused the 998 service, whereas the Ulstermen had accepted it. In heart-rending and poetic language the Irish appealed to the United States for aid against this new English aggression, for redress, for sympathy.

Over the case of the United States Mr. Simes shook his head, for the Americans had refused the service, in imitation of the Soviet Union. For these two monster States seemed bound together in a bond of mutual hatred which forced them to be as like each other as possible. The Russians had refused the service because they could not agree to the manning of the posts by any but *Communist*

neutrals, to which Dr. Melli and his advisors would not agree, although repeatedly assured that Communist neutrality was far more neutral than any other kind.

The American refusal was more complex: the President's Bill to accept the service was thrown out by Congress owing to a powerful lobby by the electronics interests. Another Bill, prepared by a Republican Senator, proposed the formation of a company of private capitalists to lease the 998 service from Agraria, and to resell the service to the States Governments of the Union. This was hailed as an ingenious means of assuring that private, not public enterprise would be protecting the United States, and therefore the integrity of the American way of life. However, the Bill failed to pass, owing to a violent agitation on the part of the Metal Workers Union, who objected to their lives being saved by aluminium processed in Europe, at low wages. A third Bill was drafted, based on the forty years' experience of trying to get the T.V.A. scheme adopted without allowing certain millionaires to make some hundreds of millions more out of the taxpayers. However, at this point the Russian refusal became known, and the possibility of acceptance vanished.

"There seems to be no chance of their changing their minds," Mr. Simes was saying. "They will not have it."

"They're the only *men* left in the West," Sir Isador said, ferociously, squaring his round little shoulders, glaring fiercely out of his filmed eyes, and stamping on the ground like a tiny little stallion.

"He's making millions out of them," a gossip columnist informed Lady Betty, "buying up European bombs and rockets and selling them to the Yanks and the Russians."

The information was correct, but Sir Isador was not the less sincere for that. He really did admire American aggressiveness; they, like himself, were ready to fight rather

than skulk behind a hedge. Sir Isador had enjoyed every minute of the late war, the bustle, the moments of fear, the speeches of Mr. Churchill, the rumors and counter-rumors: all these things made up for something which had been missing from his life. Sir Isador had lost money because of the war, and would willingly have lost more in return for a longer war, a continuance of the ordering and disciplining of the masses by force; of his own authority in the Ministry of Essential Services; of the atmosphere of strong men in control of tremendous events.

There is nothing surprising in his state of mind, for his life had contained nothing which belongs to the state of being a man. There had been no danger, no struggle, no discovery, no love. Nothing so convinces a man that he really is, after all, alive, and may hope to enjoy adventures of which he has heard or read, such as loving or hating or fearing or being heroic, as the immediate danger of death. Throughout his life Sir Isador had been bored, but during the war he had been so stirred up that he had even been capable of generosity and charity. He hated the new era of security which condemned him to a living death again, with his Emma, his sickly garden, his bad whisky and his taxed millions.

Sir Isador came out of his bitter and depressing reverie to hear Lady Betty say:

"Well, Sir Isador, what do you think of it all? Is it the millennium established?"

The knight brightened like an April day. He liked Betty Singleton: she was pretty, always treated him with a friendly respect, and was as hard as nails.

"I'm glad to see you, young woman," he said.

"I'm sure you are," she replied, with an enchanting, wide-eyed smile, "I must be like pure alcohol compared

with . . ." she waved her hand towards the group about Agar Simes.

". . . with my whisky," Sir Isador completed for her, and they both laughed, understanding each other.

"No, but seriously," she said.

"Never had any time for safety first," he replied. "I've always taken risks." He pushed out his hollow little chest, almost strutting before this pretty woman, thoroughly manly, really believing what he said.

"Struggle," he said, "that's the thing. But what's the use of talking? They wanted safety and now they've got it. F'r instance, got a young chap working for me now down in Kent. Does a bit of gardening, handy about the house, came to us out of the blue. Name of Sylvester Grant. I pay him three quid a week and he's happy. Why? He could earn ten, twenty, a hundred. Nothing he don't do well, young, strong. But it's the safety he wants, peace of mind. Peace . . . pah!"

To cover the hot flush which colored her face at the sound of that name, Betty had raised her handkerchief to her nose. She could not speak until she regained her self-control. Sir Isador was saying, "I wish I could get my hands on the fellow that invented that damned gadget," and he gestured with his angry, fragile, arthritic fingers. Betty said:

"I'll be in your part of the world in a day or two, and I'd like to see Lady Brophy again. Can I come to dinner?"

Sir Isador beamed at her. "Delighted," he said, and it was true. "You shall see our master Grant for yourself," he promised.

Betty was aware of a personable man of forty hovering about herself and Sir Isador, and she now gave him her attention. Seeing that he had caught her eye, he approached:

"You don't remember me, I daresay, Lady Betty?"

"Dr. Steven-Blair, isn't it? Of course! Only you were magnificent as a Commander when last I saw you."

"Trials of type 276 in *Thunderer*," he said. Betty introduced the physicist to the distiller.

"And what do *you* think of 998?" Sir Isador asked.

"It's physics coming into its own," Steven-Blair said. "It was bound to happen, you know. All that idiotic throat-cutting had to stop." Sir Isador looked sour and turned away to talk to his host, who was showing a bishop and a football-pool promoter round his grounds.

Steven-Blair had spoken with the confidence of the lesser members of his order, but he was puzzled. He remembered Lieutenant Cohen's visit to him, and the raising of the question of 998. The whole business seemed to have had its beginning in a very obscure way. He said to Betty:

"What happened to Owbridge's technical man . . . what was his name? Levy, Isaacs, Abrahams . . ."

"You mean Lieutenant Cohen. He went to do trials in a submarine, and it sank."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"He was a brave man, you know. I heard, by the way, that you took on some very dangerous bomb-disposal jobs?"

Steven-Blair shrugged, "And very frightened I was. But one felt one had to do it."

They walked among the roses and Steven-Blair talked about himself, his new appointment, at Harwell. Betty listened with the correctly interested and admiring interjections, and when she left him to resume her duties as a hostess, she left him feeling that he had made an impression.

Two days later Betty went into Kent to stay with a

cousin near Wye. She called on Lady Brophy and was invited to dinner.

"We've absolutely no servants, dear," Emma Brophy said. "You'll have to take us as you find us."

"You've got the paragon Sir Isador was telling me about."

"Oh, Grant. I don't know that I'd dare ask him to wait at table. Not but what he's obliging, but such a superior man."

Betty left, making no attempt to see Sylvester. She was quite sure that he was still in love with her, and had run away because he resented feeling so helplessly in her power. It would be fun to see his face when he found himself waiting upon her at table, and this time he could not very well run away. Whatever he suffered, she would know how to make it up to him afterwards. And then . . . all the way back to her cousin's house she indulged herself in fantasies: she would appear before the world, beautiful, clever and wise, leading her lover by the hand, announcing, "Here is the true savior of your peace, your sanity, and your lives." They would be worshiped, almost deified. Or there was the more dramatic alternative of an exposure: herself and Sylvester would tower like truth-bringing and avenging angels above the cowering mob, denouncing the vast fraud which their leaders, incompetent to govern honestly, were using to govern somehow. They would play the leading role, of course, in the resultant *sturm und drang*, the enormous and Wagnerian uproar which would shake the world.

It did occur to Lady Betty that were she to choose the first alternative, someone else might discover and reveal that 998 was a fraud. But the danger was trifling. Only some insanely aggressive Power trying against reason to cross a 998 frontier, would make the discovery. A people

led by a Hitler, with demoniac delusions of grandeur, or by a Pericles or a Lincoln with equally dangerous delusions of virtue. But was any such attempt likely? The overwhelming crypto-religious authority of science and the Press had already given 998 the integrity of a stone wall. And who tries to push over a stone wall with his head?

28

LADY BROPHY said to Sylvester, "Grant, I wonder whether you would help me out?" It was the day before she expected Lady Betty to dinner, and she was not used to entertaining. Sylvester merely looked attentive, but ever since his conviction that there was virtue in 998, his air had become much less formidable, and he even answered her ladyship's summons with a smile. "We have a guest coming tomorrow," she said, "I wonder . . . I don't really care to suggest . . ."

Sir Isador brusquely interrupted her nattering:

"Wait at table in a white coat. Any objection?"

"None."

Sylvester went back to his digging and his reflections. He had got as far as deciding that the mere scientific truth, as he knew it, was of no importance. What mattered was the rising tide of good feeling which his invention had provoked: fear banished, charity was returning, and that was the thing to keep before his mind. But that decision posed problems which must be solved, and solved by his

own genius. He had never read a line of philosophy, nor fortunately did it occur to him to do so now, for thrice to confound his already sufficient confusion would have got him nowhere.

And he wanted to do what was right: he had been taught that truth was great and would prevail, and being of his generation, believed he knew what truth was. He knew that the noblest men of his time had devoted themselves to the uncovering of some part of it, as, for example, that a little bit of uranium, suitably shocked, will kill fifty thousand people in Japan. The greatness and respectability of the ruthless and unvarnished scientific truth was, indeed, the only morality which Sylvester had been taught. But could there, he was now wondering, be some other kind of truth? Could a myth be true, for example? Well, whether it could or not, he was now a myth maker, and certain that whether truth was or was not being served by his device, good nature certainly was.

He slept on that, and when he awoke, it was Thursday, the day he was to wait at table. He looked out of the window while he was dressing, but the comfort of his view was denied him, for rain in a dense, grey veil was hung between him and the landscape, water dripped from the trees, the plants in the garden looked brilliantly green and polished, and even the dead, grey soil looked rich and live and black.

He spent the day in jobs about the house, and when the guest arrived he was in the kitchen, receiving his orders from the cook in the shrill bellow necessary for hearing above the noise of her radio.

"'Er ladyship's in the lounge," cook shrieked at him, putting a silver tray with glasses and decanters into his hands.

Sylvester took the tray into the lounge, where he found only Lady Brophy and Sir Isador. He left the tray on the table, and then ran up to his room for a handkerchief, bursting into the room in a great hurry lest he should be wanted downstairs. There, seated on his narrow cot and contemplating his room, was Lady Betty Singleton. Sylvester stopped dead.

"Good God!" he exclaimed.

Lady Betty looked at him as if this situation were the most ordinary thing in the world, smiled sweetly and said:

"Hallo, Sylvester darling."

Sylvester pushed the door to behind him with an air made so menacing by his confusion and perturbation that Betty stood up in alarm. Sylvester, far too upset to remember his manners, said:

"What the devil are you doing here?"

Lady Betty flushed angrily. "How dare you talk to me like that?" she said.

"Well, I'm sorry. You startled me. How did you . . . ?"

"Never mind that. A stroke of luck. Why did you run away from me that day?"

He shrugged sulkily and stared out of the window. He knew, vaguely, the answer to her question, but not so as to be able to give it. Betty came and stood behind him.

"The truth is," she said, trying to provoke him, "you don't love me any more."

She was sure that this was untrue, of course. She had changed their old, frivolous relationship into something it had never been, to suit the state of mind which his disappearance had forced on her. His shoulders twitched but he said nothing and she went on:

"You and I, and 998 . . . of course, I know it's nonsense but . . ."

He flung round at that.

"Nonsense—why nonsense?" he demanded fiercely.

"Good Lord, don't bite me, darling. You told me . . ."

"I told you a pack of lies," he said, and, "I must get back to my work."

"You're not trying to make me believe that 998 isn't a phony?"

"Of course it isn't!"

"You're lying. I can see you're lying. You must be mad!"

Betty spoke with emphasis, but suddenly all that was secondary, and, with a shock of humiliation, she began to suspect that she had made a bad miscalculation. She changed her tone, and speaking almost anxiously, said:

"Sylvester, I asked you if you remembered asking me to marry you?"

Sylvester stared at his feet, a creature desperate and at bay. There was only one way out of the corner into which she had forced him: brutality. He said, harshly:

"Three times. I was dam' drunk each time."

He pushed past her and ran downstairs to the kitchen. Betty turned white with rage and mortification; and in that heat of fury was forged the certainty that Sylvester really had been lying about 998. What was his game? Going slowly downstairs to her hosts, she made up her mind that whatever it was, he would not get away with it, if she had to wreck Europe to make a fool of him. Not that she thought of it in those terms: her mind was on nothing but humiliating him, without any thought of the consequences.

Presently Sylvester was ordered to serve the soup, which he did quite calmly and deftly. Betty gave no sign of knowing him, did not seem even to notice him. Like everyone else in Europe, she and Sir Isador were discussing 998, and Sylvester listened to them with close attention as he

went from the service hatch to the table, or opened the wine.

"I couldn't agree with you more," Betty was saying, when Sylvester first began to attend; "the whole attitude is contemptible, and it's also very silly, because sooner or later someone is going to find a way of getting through the radiation."

While they ate their sole, they discussed this aspect of the subject. Lady Brophy said very little. Her husband was liable to bully her if she opened her mouth in public, and in any case she was busy controlling Sylvester with a series of nods, winks, motions of the hand and other gestures and grimaces which gave her the look of an idiot.

"Precisely"—Sir Isador summed up some sweeping generalization made by his pretty guest—"precisely. Preventive war is the only way to peace. It's unpopular to say it, but I shall keep on saying it. Churchill's the man we want, and by God! we'll have him yet! Atom bombs on their power centers, and then in we go and give 'em a decent government of businessmen. The good old rule: trade following the flag. 998! I'd enjoy just five minutes conversation with the ninny who invented that . . . that . . ." Words failed Sir Isador, but he shook his fish knife in the air with great ferocity.

"You know, of course, I knew him?" Betty said.

"Did you though? What was he like? Another of those half-baked idealists, I suppose?"

Betty stole a look at Sylvester, who was handing her potatoes: he was impassive, the perfect servant.

"No," she said. "He was young and good-looking, neither brilliant, nor even very serious. I knew him extremely well. He was a useful dancing partner, but how he ever managed to invent anything, I simply can't imagine. In fact, it's that which gives me my suspicions as to why

they shot him. It might have been to stop him telling, when it was late in the day, that the whole thing was a stumer. Friends of mine, men who ought to know, have their suspicions too, of 998, and they don't propose to go on being fooled."

Sir Isador looked very excited at this news, and leaned towards his guest with so much animation that if his eyes were not exactly bright, they were less cloudy than usual.

"Go on," he urged her, "go on."

She gave him a very serious look, just as if she were considering how much she could tell him, and said:

"It's possible,"—she seemed to hesitate—"possible that there is no such thing as 998 at all. You see, it's like this——"

Sylvester dropped a large dish of potatoes at his feet, with a crash.

"What a bloody liar you are," he said, with deliberate violence.

There was a triple gasp. Sir Isador gaped, Lady Brophy looked aghast and said "Grant!" and Betty looked furious and triumphant, her cheeks flaming and her eyes flashing beautifully. They all stared at Sylvester, who was as white as the double-damask table cloth, and whose hands were shaking. He ignored the two women and concentrated the whole power of his attention on Sir Isador.

"You said you wanted to meet Sylvester Green. Well, here I am. You don't like 998. You wish it *was* a fraud. Well, if you will listen to me, I will tell you the truth about it. I don't like your ideas, but at least you're not a fool and have no reason to be malicious. I'm the inventor of the thing, and I'm the only person fit to say what should be done with it."

Sir Isador was watching his raving manservant warily. For a moment he took his eyes off the lunatic and glanced

swiftly at Lady Betty. She shrugged, touched her temple, and said:

"Stark ravers. I served for two years with Green. This man isn't even much like him."

Sir Isador appeared to ignore her and turned again to Sylvester.

"Come into the library," he said, and got up to lead the way, which was quite a brave thing to do because he believed that Sylvester was criminally mad. As the door closed behind them, "Now, tell me," he said.

"I made 998 out of an old pram and the three balls from a Rosyth pawnshop."

Sylvester had made up his mind to tell Sir Isador the truth before Betty could do so; he would persuade this powerful man to support his myth, flatter him into compliance by giving him the real truth. It was the only way.

"You did, eh?" said Sir Isador, to that insane statement.

"Yes. You see——"

"But then, what are you doing *here*?"

"Well, they shot me to keep me from talking. You see the Admiralty——"

"And why are you suddenly telling me this?"

"Because if I don't Betty Singleton will, and it's vital that you should see it my way. For God's sake don't think I'm just trying to cash in. It's not that at all. I——"

"Ah. Money. That's it. I suppose you've been cheated of your rights in the invention?"

Sylvester was far too excited to notice the satisfaction in his employer's voice, upon finding an explanation he understood. He did not even notice the irony of the question.

"Rights?" he said, vaguely. "No. I've never thought of it like that. Millions couldn't pay for what I've unwittingly given the world. You see, here's what happened——"

"Later, boy, later. I'll have to deal with Lady Betty. For the time being you'd better stay in here."

Sir Isador left Sylvester alone, slumped in a chair. He closed the library door quietly behind him, and very slowly and gently turned the key.

29

ALTHOUGH Lady Betty was angry, and determined to make trouble, she found that she did not want actually to witness Sylvester's final humiliation, and so she left *Glencoe* before the police arrived to arrest him.

Whatever she had managed to feel and believe before, when there was chance of being *doyenne* of the hoax and very much on the inside, she was now irritated past bearing by the imbecilities of the Press and her friends on the subject of the 998 peace, 998 security, 998 progress. She would never consent to appear, although only to herself, as one of the two billion dupes of a fraud. As she left his house, she told Sir Isador that she would call on him at his London office. He invited her to come, instead, to his hotel.

Sir Isador retained the topmost floor of Berridges Hotel in Clifford Street, for use whenever he wanted it. It gave him one of the few pleasures he was capable of feeling, to be perched up there above visiting royalty, American millionaires, French dressmakers, all the rag-tag and bobtail of the Western dominant minority. He enjoyed receiving, as a permanent and enormously paying tenant, priority of

service over these important people. He liked being damned rude to the servants, and buying back their servility with huge and contemptuously-given tips. Sir Isador supported the ruling system with all his money, but it amused him to humiliate its incumbents by whatever means occurred to him.

Betty came to tea from Downing Street, where she had been one of the guests at a reception for Dr. Melli. But first she had been to the airport to see Andreas Melli come to London, as had half a million other Londoners who cheered, waved, exchanged hats, stamped, clapped and shouted. Watching from the interior of her Daimler, cleverly placed to command a good view of the arrival, Betty saw the great man step out of his aeroplane amidst the shocking uproar of the sixty jet planes escorting him, machines now kept only for such ceremonies. Even the earsplitting crash of the welcoming shout uttered by half a million citizens was made to sound remote by the screaming roar of the jets. They passed, and the cheering came into its own. Betty could see Dr. Melli shaking hands with the King, and even at that distance his elegant ease of manner was apparent. It was now that the ancestors he had once accused of betraying him, came to his aid: one saw that the President, the Commander of the Corps of Neutrals, was indeed the son of Prontine Counts. The English crowd, ever sensitive in such matters, felt their august visitor's quality across the gulf which separated him from them. Their cheering acquired an almost respectful note: here was not only their savior, but a gentleman. Betty remarked as much to Agar Simes, rapidly taking notes at her side, who grunted his thanks and added the point to his piece.

Andreas Melli was walking between the King and the Prime Minister to the royal car. The cheering had stopped,

the crowd now gazing in silence towards the man they could not for the most part see. The silence was worshipful, a tribute to the hero who had raised the burden of fear from their shoulders, and even made possible the raising of the sweet ration; who had given them back security of life, and so the power to behave more like men, than like animals at bay. They were people who liked to feel virtuous, and within the fence of 998 radiation, as once within that of Christian faith and doctrine, they could adopt a set of principles and live by them.

Following the royal car, Betty drove on to the official luncheon. She found that the contemplation of Dr. Melli's triumph left a slightly bitter taste in her mouth. Melli might, indeed,

Bestride the narrow world like a Colossus

but she, for one, would never be of the company of petty men who

Walk under his huge legs and peep about.

Betty and the President greeted each other with formal words: how much, she wondered, bowing, did he really know? And Pflumbaum, to whom she was now introduced by the Prime Minister, and who bowed and kissed her hand, how much more or less did *he* know? If they knew what her mind held, would they look guilty, show a frightened expectation of the collapse of the hoax? Or, more assured, since fear and forethought could hardly be in the character of a successful modern politician, whereas effrontery might be there to excess, would they snigger with her over the fortunate gullibility of men? Or would their minds be colored by the immensity of their success, and by the good they no doubt believed themselves to be doing?

Her speculations, had she but known it, really applied only to Dr. Pflumbaum. And it was a fact that however ironically, and with whatever detachment, that remarkable man might view the results of his deception, his mind could not absolutely escape the influence of their excellence. Somewhere in the world there might be another man, unless Green was really dead, who knew what he, Pflumbaum, knew; and from time to time the doctor wondered how it would be if they met. He recalled, for he was an excellent Latinist, Cicero's report that, *Cato mirari se aiebat quod non rideret haruspex, cum haruspicem vidisset*. But the sneer was, Dr. Pflumbaum was inclined to think, unworthy and, typical of Cato, shallow. Why, if all men believed in the miracles wrought by the priests by pulling strings behind the idol, should the priests be so arrogant as to snigger, nudge, burst out laughing at the sight of each other? How much more natural that they should come to think of themselves, sincerely, as tools in the hands of God. How could they know that the mere accidents of what seemed to them deceits, were not the very means used by the Power they served, to achieve results which they saw for themselves to be good?

Dr. Pflumbaum, it will be seen, was no more immune than the next man to the healing influence of success, power, and notice.

Betty had no such balms to soften her temper, now irritated beyond bearing by the solemn worship she saw offered to Sylvester's toy. She left the reception determined that no one should be in a position to take this nonsense seriously. Let Sylvester, Melli, Pflumbaum and the rest bluff their way out of the mess which she and Sir Isador would make for them. And so, an hour later, she was greeting Sir Isador with her most charming smile, squeezing his hand in response to his real pleasure at receiving her.

She had made up her mind to use him in exposing the hoax of 998, in bringing the world back to its senses and its machine guns, and in being the focus of a gratifying typhoon of excitement and tragedy.

Sir Isador led her to his drawing room: he said, wheeling the tea trolley up to the low, pneumatic easy chair set in two inches of carpet pile, where he had installed her:

"Betty, I'm delighted to see you. I've had Bascombe, the steel man, here to lunch. We've been bellyaching about this damned 998 contraption."

"I've never met him," Betty said.

"A grand man. A Scot, you know. You should've heard him."

And Sir Isador, in a pantomime of passionate feeling, and a creditable Scots accent, gave a brief imitation of his late guest—*Aye, if only the imposter Gr-r-r-ant had been the ver-r-itable Gr-r-reen indeed!*

Betty laughed politely. She realized that the atmosphere was propitious, and pouring tea for the two of them, ate a sugar cake. Sir Isador still shrilly complained, his chalky fingers and skinny arms waving and flapping like the wings of a vulture tormented by too many lice.

"Ah, the fact is, my dear," he said, "we may rave and grumble, but the thing's done and can't be undone. I've only today sold fifteen hundred old tanks to the Americans and the Russians, picked up cheap at Woolwich, and sold 'em at a fat price. But what's money, all said and done? What's it all coming to?"

"Peace on earth, and goodwill to all men," Betty suggested, maliciously.

"I'll hear nothing against Christianity, young woman." Sir Isador was almost stern. "That was all right. I bring not peace, but a sword. A *Man* said that. But this gutless thing we're to have now—it's *scientific*. It works!"

"But does it?" Betty said, beginning on her campaign, "does it? What's worked, up to now, has been the prestige of science. Has anyone really *tried* the thing?"

"Presumably," said Sir Isador. "It's not conceivable that it should have been taken on almost universally——"

Betty interrupted, "Hyman Pflumbaum vouches for it. That's the real point. I've just met him. An enigmatic and impressive man. If Einstein said that, after all, the Earth was flat, would you doubt him? We've all been taught to take the scientist's word for it—for what we know."

"What are you trying to say, girl?"

"That in my opinion there's about as much practical force in 998 as there was in the command, *Love one another*."

Sir Isador sat up sharply and stared at her. "You mean," he said, "that we still may be atom-bombed, bug-bombed?"

His eyes gleamed and his breath came fast: the idea enchanted and horrified him. He enjoyed it as he had enjoyed the air raids, as a man with a jaded palate enjoys some violently peppery sauce. The tremendous bangs! The tottering buildings! The flames! The tears! By God, yes, one had known for sure that one was alive! It was all big, noisy, like Wagnerian opera. He had even enjoyed his own qualms of terror. The delight when it stopped, that banging and flashing and crashing! Stopped for long enough for one to anticipate the next lot.

Sir Isador gulped, calmed himself, and said to Betty sharply:

"No nonsense, girl. Do you *know* anything?"

"That I will not say. I think that if you investigate, you will find what will very much surprise you."

"Investigate?"

"Take one of the posts to pieces."

"Good God!"

"Nothing less will do. It's useless to think you can turn half a world on its head without taking a risk. There's a remarkable stability in the new régime already. I suppose you didn't see this morning's reception of Melli?"

"I did. Disgusting! A mob gone hysterical over its own safe hides!"

"Exactly. So you see it won't be easy. But open one of those tin towers round the coast, and you can blow the whole thing sky high."

"And who's to do it?"

"If you've got the money to pay, I've got the man."

"Who?"

"That's my business. I'll be frank with you, Sir Isador. I've heard you say a lot about your disgust with the softening up of the world. Words hurt nobody. How about their value in cash and action?"

"By God!" Sir Isador said, "if you're serious, young woman, you and your friends, here's five thousand pounds which say *I* am." And he slapped his check book on the table.

Betty went home to telephone Dr. Steven-Blair.

30

AFTER his remand for a medical report Sylvester was so depressed that he sat all day in his cell, his eyes on the floor and his hands in his lap: from the moment of his arrest in Sir Isador's library, charged with *Impersonation*,

and *Attempting to obtain money by false pretences*, he had been living in a nightmare of unreality. The things he was undergoing had, as it were, nothing whatever to do with any self which he could recognize: they might have been happening to someone else, into whose consciousness he had unhappily intruded.

The arrest, the police court, the prison were all parts of a dream, but a dream from which, it seemed, he would not wake, so that his discouragement was understandable. In the course of even the worst nightmare, there is an undertow of sanity, a current which the dreamer knows will carry him into wakefulness and safety, if only he can swim into it. But Sylvester had no illusions: he was awake.

He did what he was told by an indifferent warder, in a kind of dull misery: they made him take a warm bath in water purple with disinfectant; they made him sweep his cell and eat his food. During some hours he was sustained by the irrational belief that since he was a human being, this could not be happening to him by intent. There had been a mistake which would be rectified. His being shut up like an animal, treated as a number, allowed no word or act of his own, housed as soundly and with as little humanity as if he had been a fairly valuable side of beef or bacon—all this could not possibly go on for more than an hour or two.

But while he entertained this fantasy, Sylvester knew that it *was* a fantasy. What he had feared so poignantly when he had first arrived in London as Sylvester Grant, had now happened indeed: he had become *other people*.

This shocking conclusion led him, briefly, into a vicarious suffering such as is usually borne only by saints. Suddenly he knew that the people he had read about in the paper, thieves and murderers for example, but also, more unhappy than these, those unfortunates who are dealt

with in groups and masses, must not be thought of with detachment. The minorities abused by rival governments; the victims of revolutions; the nameless wretches who fall into the traps unwittingly set by clumsy bureaucrats, all these Sylvester briefly *knew*. They were not groups of nameless faces, but each one was, for himself, a single and miraculous identity, the pivot of the world. In the depth of feeling which his own misadventures had created, Sylvester could have wept for the nameless. He was not a saint, and the mood of generous sympathy did not last long: shortly, he was again considering his own case.

But even he did not know the grimness of that case. He did not know that he might not, perhaps, be able to count on the scales of justice being held with a steady hand and balanced with an impartial eye. There were powers in the land to which no magistrate would have dreamed of paying a moment's lip service; and which no magistrate would dare absolutely to flout. It was Sylvester's worst misfortune that, for the sake of a thoroughly topical headline, Lord Singleton's paper, followed by others, had reported his arrest as that of a Communist agent.

There are fashions in journalistic terms of abuse: anarchist, nihilist, socialist, bolshevik, communist. Hard-working sub-editors are not malicious; they earn their living by supplying the commodity in demand. In the state of the public temper, and despite the good effects of the beginnings of 1998 security, to be branded a Communist was extremely dangerous, for much deference had to be paid to the source of dollars. As the Home Secretary said to his wife: "The poor devil has been labeled a Communist. There's no evidence for it, by the way, not a shred. But they might as well have called him a leper. He's past helping."

The Home Secretary was wrong. The Law might be

interpreted in terms of the current prejudice, as it always is; but there was still science. The Court sent to Sylvester a lawyer and a psychiatrist. At first he would not talk to them, but sat, sullen and suspicious, and glowered. Or, like Sterne's miserable starling, mechanically begged them,

Let me out; Let me out!

The psychiatrist made notes in a book, and muttered long monologues to the lawyer, of which the only word distinguished by Sylvester was *melancholia*. But the lawyer was a young man, a beginner, anxious to do well by his client. He soothed Sylvester, argued with him, shrewdly abused the Brophys. He withheld from him the devastating news that he was accused of communism, and spoke eloquently of civil liberties, until at last, daring to believe these two earnest men his friends, Sylvester told his ridiculous tale again.

He did not tell it well: he gave the facts, but not the moods, and the facts of such an account, out of the context of the moods which have provoked them, make no sense. The two professional men heard him in pitying silence. They noted that he kept his eyes on the floor, that he spoke low and sullenly, never looked at them, wrung his hands over the vast consequences of his joke, and pleaded, with insane intensity, that these consequences were nevertheless good and must be sustained. When he had finished he looked at them with tortured eyes and said to the lawyer:

"They must never know. Never, never! Promise me that, at whatever cost, you will keep what I have told you to yourself."

The lawyer intercepted a significant glance from the psychiatrist.

"I think I can promise that," he said.

The pair left Sylvester. Walking towards the bus stop the lawyer said:

"I suppose I'll get used to this sort of thing. At present I find it harrowing."

The psychiatrist consoled him.

"I think we can help. Medicine has its moments, and it's by no means an obscure or difficult case. Delusions of responsibility, morbid anxiety over public matters, inverted fears, and then that characteristic desire that all should be secret, that his trouble is really the world's trouble."

"Extraordinary!"

"On the contrary, my dear fellow, commonplace. Cases like it all the time. Last week we had a man who was neglecting his work and family because he had become desperately afraid that God was offended with the world, and was spending twelve hours a day in prayer, and three in trying to write poems of praise and propitiation. It was particularly awkward, because he was the key man in a slaughterhouse, and meat supplies were being upset. We cured him, of course. Gave him whacking great electric shocks. But I've got a better idea for your man."

The days passed, and Sylvester sat and glowered at his feet, moved only when he was ordered, acted only in response to some other will. The psychiatrist came and sat with him, watched him staring at vacancy, made more notes. He said to Sylvester's lawyer:

"You'll back me up in Court?"

"Yes, if we can help the poor chap."

"There is something I have been meaning to try for some time now, and with the law so enlightened . . ."

He told the lawyer what he wanted to do to Sylvester. The latter looked at him with an expression of horror, of awe, of admiration, finally of reverence.

"*Can* you do that?"

"Lord, yes! It's becoming quite the thing!"

"I mean, legally, in a case like this?"

"Certainly. You should know that. Have a look at the Criminal Justice Act of 1948. Your client will be ordered by the Court voluntarily to submit to treatment. If his present attitude continues, he will probably make no answer. But you will agree, on his behalf. The Court will make a probation order, and put him in my hands. I'll undertake to put a good and useful citizen back in circulation within a few weeks."

"My God, what progress you people have made! *What* do you call this operation?"

"Prefrontal leucotomy. Some of these melancholic states are seated in certain physical parts of the brain. It happens that we can cut those parts away without damaging the mind. We not only remove the trouble, but any chance of its recurrence. We simply change the patient's whole mentality. Think of the unnecessary sufferings undergone by morbid types like Poe, Dostoevsky, Swift, chaps like that. Today, we could turn them, hey-presto, into thoroughly bright and useful citizens."

"What do you aim at?"

"The decent norm, of course. You know the sort of chap . . . married, couple of kids, wife his best pal, bowler hat, umbrella, bottle of whisky lasts him a month, plays a game of golf or does a bit of gardening, p'raps."

"Amazing! And you can do this for Grant?"

The psychiatrist smirked happily: true, it was some time since he had used a scalpel, and the muscles of his right hand were somewhat coarsened by his hobby of gardening, and an occasional round of golf. Still, he was confident that he would make a good job of Grant. It would be an interesting case to discuss with his wife that evening. His bus arrived, he touched his bowler hat with

his umbrella, in salute to the lawyer, and jumped aboard.

In Court, Sylvester behaved much as had been expected. He refused to raise his eyes, and mumbled the few words he had to speak. The psychiatrist delivered his report, and the magistrate listened to him with that reverence for the recondite, the esoteric, for downright incomprehensible gibberish, which characterizes the judiciary in societies dominated by priests of religion or science. Here was Plato's dream realized: the philosopher laid down the law, and the rest were humbly grateful.

Sylvester found himself in an ambulance. He was glad not to be going back to his cell, and he looked out of the window of his ambulance with something like animation, beholding with pleasure the world he had lost. He even began to take an interest in himself again. What had been happening to him? Where were they taking him? What were they going to do with him? He shook his head and admitted that he had been letting himself down, that he was failing dismally in his mission, and that he ought to have paid more attention and fought back.

The Clinic was in a remote suburb of London, which had sprung up on an arterial road as towns used to spring up on rivers. The Clinic was a giant building of concrete lumps, with innumerable windows. Sylvester, still docile, but no longer indifferent, let himself be put to bed; but he saw his clothes removed from the room with something of the horror which had first oppressed him when they locked him in a cell. The room was a pleasant one, with white and primrose paint, flowers on the table, and pretty chintz curtains. The psychiatrist, Dr. Maclean, was responsible for this, being the author of a monograph on the use of color in the treatment of nervous disorders. But from Sylvester's point of view the room was a place where he had to be against his will. The door was not locked; but

had they not taken away his clothes, leaving him only pyjamas? Were they not treating him with that bland, benevolent, rational, and terrifying authority which kindly and gently drowns unwanted kittens?

Sylvester's nurse was a plump, pretty girl with a vivacious and flouncing manner. She seemed to bounce from place to place, to whisk things up rather than lift them, to look as if she had been inflated with a pump to just the right degree of fleshy roundness. She brought him a good meal, which he ate with one eye upon her as she bustled about the room. She was in high spirits, for Dr. Maclean, whose lean common sense she adored, had assigned her to this especially interesting case which, she knew, would be the subject of important papers and discussions. She felt the honor, and determined to live up to it. Perhaps her name might even be mentioned, though if it were, there would be the disadvantage of being driven twice as hard by Matron, who would be furious. She broke off her day-dreaming to look at the patient. He was, she thought, ever so good-looking. Pity he was nuts. He caught her eye and smiled timidly.

"What am I here for, sister? I'm not ill."

"Indeed you are! When Dr. Maclean says anyone's ill, they're ill all right, and no error." She fussed with the flowers.

"What's the matter with me?"

"You'll have to ask Dr. Maclean."

"Is he the man who kept coming to my cell in prison?"

"I expect so. He's ever so conscientious."

"Well, it's all very well, but this is *me*, you know. I wish I knew what it was all about."

Sylvester said this peevishly. People didn't seem to realize that he was someone definite, an identifiable person, and it was worrying him more and more. It was far worse

than being a naval rating on the lower deck, where everyone had been so different from everyone else. The nurse was saying:

"You'll know everything you need to know. You'll be just like other people, after the operation."

Sylvester sat up with a jerk, spilling his glass of water, and turning as white as the spotless linen of his sheet.

"Operation! Good God! What operation?"

"There! I never could hold my tongue." The girl was really mortified at her want of professional discretion.

"But *what* operation?" Sylvester almost shrieked at her.

"Ssh," she begged, "you'll bring Matron."

31

OPERATION! Sylvester was terrified: the only operable condition he knew about was appendicitis. Surely he could not have appendicitis? And yet why had they sent him here? He recalled his mother having appendicitis, how he was wakened at night by lights going on, and then there was his father, grotesque in his anxiety and his pyjamas; and then his own horrified shrinking from the groans coming from his parents' room, his passionate determination to know nothing about it, to repudiate, while he agonizingly pitied, that woman in there, disgustingly transformed, made horribly treacherous by her pain. She had no *right* to be like that, other than he needed her to be. And then the ambulance, the difficulty with the

stretcher on the narrow stairs, himself watching, crouched in a corner of the upper hall, cold and frightened. One of the hospital men had kept up a sort of soothing commentary as they worked the stretcher down . . . "We'll soon 'ave yer outa this, mum, never you fear . . . easy now, gently does it . . ." he seemed to have acquired the necessary special manner for this work, but his colleague had, perhaps, been a remover's man: Sylvester recalled his indifference to the nature of their burden, his cries of "To you," or "From me," or "Mind the plaster."

But his mother had been in shocking pain, whereas he, Sylvester, was in no pain at all. With nervous fingers he explored his right groin . . . or should it be the left? Then he pulled himself sharply together; of course it wasn't appendicitis. What then? Perhaps, as he was a kind of convict, a gaol bird, they were allowed to make experiments on him? He sweated, terrified. There was nothing outrageous in the idea, nothing which told him that such a thing would be contrary to the spirit of the times; in fact very much the reverse. He knew they weren't allowed to do very much that was terrible to *animals* . . . the R.S.P.C.A. saw to that. But, as far as he knew, there was no R.S.P.C.H. God! What were they going to do? Sylvester half started out of bed: the window . . . he might get out that way, it was no good thinking of the door for someone would certainly stop him on his way through the building. The window remained, but when he looked closely he saw that it was barred, chintz curtains or no chintz curtains. Here was a nice combination of the old and new practices: Dr. Maclean was not the man to throw away dirty water until he was quite sure of the supply of clean.

The door opened and Sylvester hastily scrambled himself back under the covers. It was Dr. Maclean. For a moment the door was open and Sylvester could see the

corridor to freedom, a sister at the big linen cupboard opposite his room, taking out clean caps and aprons and blue street cloaks. Then Dr. Maclean shut the door again, and approached Sylvester's bed with the open-eyed, candid, frank and good-natured countenance of a surgeon, a Parliamentary candidate, or a share pusher, anxious to gain the victim's confidence.

He sat down on the edge of the patient's bed and smiled at Sylvester. He had had no intention of telling the latter what he was to undergo, for Dr. Maclean adopted very readily the mystique of the role of the moment: psychiatrist, he treated his patients as clients of science; surgeon, he treated them as clients of magic. But Nurse's indiscretion forced him to take a course of which, as a rule, he did not approve. He pulled a newspaper from his pocket and played with it.

"Well, Grant," he said, "I suppose you want to know what's up with you?"

Sylvester lay in his bed like a sulky child, and would not answer, but the psychiatric surgeon ignored his sulkiness.

"I think you must want to know, in some part of your mind, why you take the world's troubles on your shoulders, why you're such a sad fellow, eh? Look, old man, if I'm to help you, you must trust me, eh? I wonder if there are moments when you know you are not really the chap you think you are, eh?"

It occurred to Sylvester that there *were* such moments. He smiled very slightly and wryly. Dr. Maclean noted the symptom with relief, and was briefly silent. As for his reasons for being sad, Sylvester needed no help from Dr. Maclean; he could not have said, with Antonio:

*In sooth I know not why I am so sad,
It wearies me; you say it wearies you;*

*But how I caught it, found it or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn.*

True, Sylvester's sadness wearied him, but evidently not his doctor, who knew all about it. As to how he caught it, it did not seem to Sylvester, in his new wisdom, that the explanation was far to seek: he just looked about him, over the years he had passed so light-heartedly, but saw now in another light.

Dr. Maclean was talking, explaining all about the human brain. No doubt his lecture would have been very interesting indeed, but Sylvester could not fetch his mind down to the doctor's level, in order to attend. He was fully occupied between his terror at what was in store; his panic feeling of being a lonely animal at bay; his preoccupation with duty, the new duty of maintaining and strengthening the life-saving myth which he had created. Indeed, had Dr. Maclean but known it, he was talking to a budding mystic, not a Protestant mystic concerned with personal salvation, but a Catholic mystic with a growing and overpowering sense of duty. Purpose, and increasing assurance despite terror, made it impossible to hear Dr. Maclean with patience.

"And so," the latter was saying, "you see that these melancholy states of mind are physical things, we can cut them away as we can an inflamed appendix. We might almost think of them as mental appendicitis. We open that old brainbox . . ." he tapped Sylvester in a friendly way on top of his head, with the newspaper, "flick, flick! with the scalpel, and there you are, right as rain." Dr. Maclean accompanied his casual and amusing *flick, flick* with a neat, corresponding gesture of wrist and fingers which caught the patient's attention, raising his terror to

a pitch of poignancy which at last fixed his mind on what the other was saying. *Flick, flick*: he could see and feel the shining, blue blade of the knife at work in his brain, paring it as he pared his toe nails, and cutting away what? What?

"Say that again," he said. Dr. Maclean, used to these periodic comings and goings of attention among his melancholics, patiently explained again.

"We want, we need your full co-operation if we're to make a man and a citizen of you, Grant," he concluded.

There came then into Sylvester's mind, from some remote English lesson of his childhood, or perhaps he had heard it during one of his occasional attendances at Sunday school, one of the most menacing passages in English literature. It came to him in a harsh voice in his mind, not the doctor's, yet he identified the speaker with the doctor. Maclean was watching his patient with professional closeness, saw the fear in the youth's eyes, the sudden lining of his fresh, young face with the marks of age, and for a moment even he doubted whether he was taking a proper course. The harsh voice said to Sylvester:

*Then Apollyon straddled quite over the whole breadth
of the way, and said, I am void of fear in this matter.
Prepare thyself to die; for I swear by my infernal den
that thou shalt go no further: here will I spill thy soul!*

For a brief moment Sylvester was granted vision: he saw himself stretched upon the operating table; masked figures stood about his head; his skull was open, like a melon from which a neat segment has been cut; and his soul was spilling out like smoke from a pipe.

Dr. Maclean was standing.

"Here," he said, "have a look at this," and handed Sylvester the newspaper folded at an account headed

Operations on the Brain. He offered Sylvester his manly, open, winning smile.

"Well," he said, "I must go. You're not the only pebble on the beach."

And he was gone. Indifferently, Sylvester glanced at the newspaper. It seemed that American millionaires were queueing up to have their melancholy cut out. Sylvester threw down the newspaper: what were the ghastly customs of remote and savage people to him?

A purpose hardened in his mind: they should not take his self, melancholy though it might be, away from him; no, nor his liberty. Free he must be: at any moment Betty or Brophy might destroy what he had made. He must go somewhere where he could both hide and keep in touch, which he might do by listening to every broadcast news bulletin. He had no money. What he must do was to escape, to get money, to buy some radio components, to find a hiding place.

His purpose was now like a physical hardening, a lump of ice in the fluidity of his mind, and the hard core round which he existed. Doubtless Dr. Maclean would cut that out for him, given half a chance; and, indeed, it was a discomfort, yet he cherished it. The purpose itself produced the obvious, the simple plan. He waited until everything seemed quiet in his part of the clinic, then got up, and quietly opened his door. There was no one about, and he opened the linen cupboard, took out skirt, apron, cap and cloak, slipped silently back into his room and in great haste, in a painful tension of anxiety lest he be discovered, put on the clothes. With his handkerchief held in his hand and pressed against his mouth, partly concealing his face, he looked at himself in the mirror. What he saw did not convince *him*, but it might pass with others. At all events

he must try, and giving himself no time to hesitate further, he walked into the corridor and straight into two doctors who had just come out of a room, talking earnestly.

Sylvester's heart seemed to stop and then to race madly. The doctors separated to let him pass and one of them said, absently:

"Sorry, sister."

His confidence reinforced, Sylvester went swiftly down the wide stairs, into the hall, and was nearly at the door when the clerk at the reception desk called him:

"Hey, sister . . . sign out, please."

Sylvester turned half round, pointed with violent gesture to his terrible toothache, shot out into the street and began to walk rapidly towards London. How easy it had been. Boldness was everything. He must get to Victoria by five, catch Clough, get money and clothes. And then?

That, too, he now knew: during the war, while his ship lay on the Tyne and he had had several days' leave, he had taken the M.O.'s advice about the state of his liver, and walked in Cumberland. There, during hours of each day, he had wandered upon lonely and magnificent moors, seen no living creature but a few mountainy sheep and many birds; absorbed, beneath high, racing skies of cloud, the quality of silence; approached, trembling, the edges of high cliffs over a raging sea, and, in fascinated horror, watched the gulls float out from the cliff face, for great heights were very terrible to him; at the mere thought of them his manhood went out of him, his knees grew watery. He had, from time to time, to scale the mast of his ship to attend to radar aerials, and these duties required more courage of him than anything the war had called for besides. At last he had turned east and fled back towards Newcastle, oppressed by loneliness, by silence and by the sense of being veritably upon the outer skin of a spinning

globe, and perhaps in some danger of being flung into space.

But now the memory of that emptiness attracted him, offered him the wilderness which he needed, where he could watch and wait and listen; listen until the moment for action was upon him.

32

SYLVESTER was camped in a megalithic passage grave, though he had no idea what it was, nor that it had been built about 2000 B.C. A scrub of stunted trees had grown up about it, concealing the building and the mound which covered it. No doubt the grave was known to archaeologists, indeed it had been opened, but Sylvester's privacy there was not likely to be disturbed until later in the year.

To make the dwelling habitable Sylvester spent three days bringing in material from outlying towns, using a tale of being a naval officer camping on leave, and referring to his camp by a false direction. He spent most of the money Clough had given him. Then he installed his radio receiver in the camp, and settled in.

During these shopping expeditions Sylvester followed, with mild interest and in several newspapers, the diverse and ingenious accounts of the disappearance of the man Grant from the Maclean clinic. Of these many fictions, the one which seemed to meet with most favor was the suggestion that the Soviet government had taken seriously

the ravings of the unhappy lunatic, and that their Embassy had followed the desperate course of seizing his person. Naturally, the Government did not believe this nonsense, but they were driven to act upon it. The Leader of the Opposition and his journalistic chorus, already irritated almost beyond endurance by the growing liberalism of public policy under the influence of 1938 security, so raged and ranted and fumed that something had to be done to silence a vulgar clamor which might cause unwholesome excitement at home and abroad. A protest was lodged with the Soviet Embassy; but no doubt the manner in which this was to be dealt with was amicably discussed over luncheon between the Ambassador and Sir Lewis Lassen.

But if these matters were mildly entertaining, they were of surprisingly little interest to Sylvester, perhaps about as interesting as an account of his funeral would be to a dead man. As soon as he was comfortably settled, Sylvester spent such time as he could safely be away from his radio, in whose power to warn him of events he put his faith, exploring the country. At night, when it was fine, he would rest on his back in the springing heather, with the vast and glorious bowl of the night sky, clear and brilliant, wheeling above him. Formerly this sense of being lightly poised upon a globe, of feeling that the Earth span indeed, had made him uneasy. But now he was ecstatic, he trembled with delight to feel that vehicle, the star called Wormwood, reel, small and swift, through the purple void, and press up beneath him in the hurry of its motion. At moments, as he looked out and down into the basin of heaven, it ceased to be a closed bowl, became space indeed, infinitely deep, through which one might drift for ever. He was seized with a delicious and yet terrifying vertigo and, almost laughing for pleasure, he clung with hands and heels to the tough shrubs of heather and ling, lest he

fall out among the snapping stars, down between the feet of the Twins, and so plunge onwards through the Milky Way.

Sylvester talked softly to himself, with dreaming detachment. Two hundred yards to the west of his camp was the cliff, below it the beach of shingle on which the tide breathed rhythmically. His quiet voice chimed with it. He told himself things which he had read, but only now began to remember for the first time, as if something had uncovered a knowledge and a maturity of feeling which he had not known he possessed. And he told himself about 998 as he now thought he understood it; and sometimes, when he fell silent, he was disappointed to hear no answer, no comment until, from the wide, shallow tarn to the east of his camp, some water-haunting bird filled the silent pause with its booming cry.

He looked for the stars he knew, as he had done on many a night at sea, but although he named them aloud to savor his familiarity with them, there was now no comfort in them, only a challenge.

"There is Venus. That green star is Sirius . . . and then the constellations, the Gemini there, the Heavenly Twins . . ." He recalled his brief but intensive Naval studies in astral navigation. . . . "Castor they call also Alpha Geminorum. It has a photometric magnitude of one point six. It, and its companion, revolve about each other in three hundred years. That other is of the third magnitude, and both are spectroscopic binaries with Sirian spectra, their distance being sixteen light years."

Sylvester was amazed at how much, in this vast hall of peace and silence, his memory served up to him. What more did he know? He had read in a book which was sent to his ship with others, that Zeus loved Leda in the form of a swan, that she brought forth two eggs, that out of one

were hatched Castor and Pollux, out of the other Helen and Clytaemnestra. Of Helen he had heard, but not of her sister.

"Castor and Pollux," he recited aloud, almost as if he had the book yet in his hands, and rhythmically, as he might speak a litany, "were worshiped at Sparta, later elsewhere in Greece and Italy. These Gods assisted the Romans against the Tusculans and their allies, at the battle of Lake Regillus, and thereafter were worshiped also in the City." How bored he had been with the book. But why? He no longer knew why. The story was now as interesting as it was true, true all through in a sense he recognized but did not understand. True, but terribly remote, the reverse of reassuring, so that he held up his own hand against the myriad-lighted sky, to be sure of his own substance. Which story was *true*, though, the astral navigators' or this other?

"Both," he said, aloud, and continued, "you did wrong to think of repudiating 998, ever. There was something in you, when you made it, to be respected. Drunkenness, perhaps?"

But then, he thought, the truth, the facts? What truth? Was it true, what he had been taught as a child, that Christ died to save man? Or what he had read as a man, that he was liquidated because the Occupying Power wished to conciliate conservative opinion among the natives, and protect their own interests against a demagogue? In the rationalist truth, Sylvester now saw nothing but a source of defeat and disgust. Therefore, since a civilization had been built upon Christ's death, there must be another truth. Aloud, again:

". . . But the world's peace dependent upon a drunken joke!"

He thought, thinking won't help, feeling might. But what do I feel? That every moment of respite that men

gain against their fears must be good, utterly good. It doesn't matter how it's come by. I know all about scientific truth . . . it's nearer to what they call God, to what they seem to mean by God, than the other . . . what is it? . . . religious truth. Scientists know about that God . . . he's a mathematician, an electrician . . . they've seen his pattern in a leaf and a crystal, but have they not also seen how (he recalled a photograph in a book, over which the Mess had laughed), the female mantis eats her mate over her shoulder in the very act of love? God was not love, he was . . . what was he? Order, perhaps. Economy? Come to think of it, his childhood conception of Jehova had looked uncommonly like a photograph of Karl Marx. Yes, truth belongs to God. What man invented was something else: love. Man went beyond the excellence of his Maker, he did what God could not do, improved the universe past recognition by bringing—what was the word?—charity, into it.

Aloud again, addressing Betelgueuse across the light years, Sylvester said, "I've grown up. I've come to. I'm awake," and, reverting to the silence of thought: and so leave your joke to work itself out. If, during two months, two days, two hours it gives some politician the chance and inclination to behave decently, it will have been worth while.

"Yes," he said, "yes," and looked out to a meteor as it plunged down the sky. And then, springing upright in a single, graceful movement, "It's warm enough to swim."

He walked through the heather, skirting the property of his only neighbors. For there, right on the edge of the towering cliff, stood Post 998/102, a silvery pillar topped by a glassy dome, shining softly in the starlight.

He went down the path which he had found, cut zig-zag down the face of the cliff and which came, skirting

that cliff most precariously and dangerously, from the village of Speesham, two hundred feet above the sea. The descent of the cliff was only possible because he could not see the drop, and because he went down swiftly, letting hands and feet do their own thinking. The shingle rattled beneath his feet as he went on down to the sea. For a moment he stood to identify the lights of a ship from those of the stars, then stripped off his clothes, and went in, a silver streak, off the top of a ridge of pebbles.

The water was icy and he uttered an involuntary shout. His voice rang loud over the water, echoed from the face of the cliff, seemed to fill the night with clamor. The 998 duty operator, perched high in the Post above him, came out and looked down, saw the white wake of Sylvester's swimming, smiled, looked up at the sky, like the inside of some enormous cavern through which there shone, by thousands of small flaws, the light of some unimaginable and distant day.

But the operator might, perhaps, have been less peacefully complacent, had he been able to overhear the words and see the actions of four people in London, who, bent over a one-inch map, were staring at the symbol for Post 998/102.

33

SIR ISADOR's finger was tapping the 998/102 symbol impatiently. The room was in much disorder, for apart from the section of the map on the table, the others, which together made up the map of all Britain, were thrown down all over the room, having been examined, debated and rejected. Sir Isador stood close to the table, Lady Betty and Dr. Steven-Blair looked over his shoulder, holding hands behind his back. Betty had some trouble in making her clasp as cordial as, she knew, was expected of her: for Steven-Blair had joined the conspiracy not out of conviction, but for her sake.

Betty had not committed herself to the extent of telling him all she knew. When he came to her summons he found her distressed, almost distracted, ready to fly and cling to him as to a stanchion of sound sense in a crumbling world. There followed her confused tale of a letter from the dead:

"The shock of seeing his writing, his letter . . . or rather just a scrawled note, and him dead for months!" She shuddered, sought, apparently unconscious of her action, blind to all but the need for help, his hand, and clung to it. She noticed, with distaste, that he had clammy, too fleshy hands. This letter, then, greatly delayed by following her, as she said, "half round the world," had been scrawled just before his . . . execution.

"Execution! But who, who is *he*?"

"I'm sorry . . . I'm making a mess of this . . . it's the worry of it. Sylvester Green. You see . . . we knew each other awfully well."

He frowned a little at that, and she bit her lip, blaming herself for forgetting that men are even jealous of the dead. She went on hastily, pressing his hand. The letter . . . no, he couldn't see it, she'd destroyed it in her first panic . . . and then, how on earth had Green managed to get it posted?

"But why has this letter put you in such a state?"

"Sebastian," she said, giving him a straight, wide-eyed look which, together with the use of his Christian name, made his heart beat wildly, "Sebastian . . . I'm frightened."

"Tell me, then, Betty."

"Do you think that 998 might be a fraud?"

"No," he said, startled, "I don't."

"But the letter, the letter."

She went on confusing him, as much by her restless propinquity as by her distracted allusions to what was in the letter. Steven-Blair's record of sound work was sufficiently impressive to enable him to keep what is called an open mind. An open mind is what Bishops and Presidents of the Royal Society can afford, but hardly curates and newly-fledged D.Sc.'s. Steven-Blair went further: he gave himself a certain news value, a certain *cachet* by openly admitting that he was superstitious. He did not allow his pose to go so far as the vulgarity of spiritualism, yet he ostentatiously avoided walking under ladders.

He was not willing to damage the image of himself which he had created for public exhibition by taking a firm line with Betty, by merely falling back upon the dogmas of his Order. *She* appealed to her woman's intuition: she knew, she felt, she was certain that something was terribly wrong. It was not in his role to dismiss this as moonshine. And then there was the appeal to his courage: the forcible opening and examination of a 998 Post would

involve the overpowering of two men and the risk of his life in disposing of the bomb-loaded seal. Such a challenge, from a challenger so beautiful, who almost threw herself into his arms, could not be refused, as Betty had known, judging her man to be, like 99 percent of his sex, sentimental to a degree and in a manner impossible to a woman.

"Look," he said to Betty, his arm protectively about her silk-clad shoulders, "take a hold on yourself, leave the worrying to me. We'll find an isolated 998 Post and we'll take the damned thing to pieces." He squeezed her shoulders, so absorbed in the vision of himself as knight-errant to the frightened maid, that he had no chance to see the steely, sardonic calculation which lit Betty's briefly unguarded eyes. No doubt Andromeda was glad enough to be rescued from the monster, but if she veiled her eyes in the presence of the brave Perseus it was not for modesty, but to conceal her derision at the fellow's attitudes of protective gallantry.

Steven-Blair, then, had committed himself, but was none the less relieved to learn thereafter that at least one distinguished and hard-headed man shared Betty's doubts. For, if he was willing to demonstrate the folly of those doubts, by having recourse to material evidence, it was because his own Faith, open mind notwithstanding, was as a Rock.

The conspirators met over a meal and a map. Steven-Blair was more impressed by Sir Isador's matter-of-fact organization than by Lady Betty's nervous premonitions.

"Here's our heroine," the Distiller had greeted Lady Betty when she arrived with the recruit, clapping a playful hand upon her shoulder.

Betty smiled and said, "Sir Isador, I think you know Dr. Sebastian Steven-Blair, Dr. Steven-Blair, Sir Isador Brophy."

The two men shook hands, dinner was served, and then

came the map and the choice of Post 998/102 as the most remote from possible interference with their raid. That decided, Sir Isador laid upon the map, like an arrangement for still-life drawing, a revolver, a box of cartridges, a coil of strong cord, three coshes, and three electric torches.

"You will provide," he said to Steven-Blair, "whatever tools you need."

The physicist nodded glumly: what, in God's name, had he let himself in for? Only Betty's hand creeping timidly within his arm as if to take refuge with him from all that Sir Isador's provision of weapons implied . . . that and the fact that his male associate unquestionably *was* the great distiller-financier, screwed Steven-Blair's courage to the sticking point.

"We leave here," Sir Isador said, "at four tomorrow evening. Lady Betty and yourself will take turns to drive. The journey will take eight hours, so that we arrive at midnight. There will be no moon."

The knight gave his orders with so much calm authority, so much relish for his command, that he was Napoleonic, standing, one hand in his jacket pocket, over the map and weapons, almost posed for a Portrait of a Commanding Officer. Steven-Blair, gaining much confidence from his leader, took his leave in rising spirits.

"We meet," he grinned at Betty, "at Philippi."

34

AFTER his swim, Sylvester made a fire in the mouth of his passage grave, and drank some whisky from his flask before he went to sleep. In the small hours a storm of wind and rain blew in from the Atlantic, the deep booming of the sea upon the foreshore wakened him, and he heard the lashing of the rain and the howling of the gale. But he was dry and close; warm and smiling, he soon slept again.

He was awakened by something which, stirring his war memories, made him clench his hands and dip his head before he was fully awake. He felt, as he collected his waking senses, a violent motion of air and dust, and the canvas curtain of his dwelling was still vibrant from some shock. He could hear, most eerie in the darkness of midnight, the mewing chorus of thousands of gulls.

"It was a bomb!" he thought, sat up abruptly, got up and ran out of the camp, huddling on his clothes and shivering as the cool night air touched his skin.

"The Post!" he thought, and ran.

The storm had passed and it was now still, clear and moonless. By starlight he raced across the turf and heather. A large car, which must have been driven a mile across the rough, from the road, stood near the Post where, however, it had lurched into a rabbit warren; the front wheels were pigeon-toed on their broken axle. The door of the Post was open, showing a moving light. Sylvester started towards it again, tripped over something, the body of a man which lay half way between the fence and the Post

itself. It was one of the operators, and he was unconscious.

Then he stood in the doorway of the metal tower, which he had never seen open before. He could not see much because the only light was from a torch, in the hands of a man who was directing the beam into the empty interior of a steel box mounted half way up the wall of the tower. Just by the door was the crouched body of a woman, while between Sylvester and the light was the body of another man. The man with the light said, aloud, "Empty, by God!"

Sylvester stumbled noisily, and the other uttered a startled exclamation and put out the light. Sylvester dived for him, there was a curse, scuffling in the dark, hard breathing, and then Sylvester stood back again, the torch in his hand. He shone it on the other man's face and said:

"Who are you? Are these people dead?"

The other did not answer at once. The dying fall of the gulls' cries, as they settled back upon their ledges, seemed hardly to break but rather to emphasize the silence. Sylvester was aware of the immensity and void of the night all about them. They were alone together.

At last the other man said:

"My name's Steven-Blair. Who are you?"

"Never mind that. What goes on here?"

"I'll tell you what goes on. Shine that torch up a bit. That's it. 998 . . . an empty tin box. The thing's a bloody fraud, that's what goes on!"

Steven-Blair spoke with quiet intensity, with the passionate anger of a priest who discovers an unordained impostor going through a mock Mass.

"There's a woman here, and a man," Sylvester said. He turned the light on the body of the man, which lay on its face and was apparently dead; but it seemed to him that the woman breathed.

"Help me with her," he demanded.

"She's not much hurt. Must have been behind him when it went off. I've examined her." Steven-Blair dismissed these trivia curtly and then burst out in exasperation at the other's indifference to what seemed to him catastrophic—"Good God! What does that matter beside this . . . this . . . it's . . ." He found no words, but sunk his head in his hands and groaned.

"But what *happened*?" Sylvester insisted. Steven-Blair told him briefly of the origins of the raid, and Sylvester was not surprised at the names of Isador Brophy and Betty Singleton. He turned his light on to the unconscious girl and saw that she was Betty indeed, with blood clotted in her hair. He had no time to pity, no inclination even. For him, as for Steven-Blair, there was a preoccupation of over-riding importance.

He asked, although his mind had not yet had time to communicate to him what he would have to do:

"Did they have time to see—*that*?"

"No. The bomb was in the seal. I started work on it, found it tricky and went out to the car for another tool. Brophy must have tampered with it. He was very impatient of playing second fiddle. When I came back, after being knocked down by the blast, I saw that Brophy was dead, but Betty only hurt. The—that bloody box was still closed. I opened it."

"So there's only you who know?"

"And you."

"And me," Sylvester agreed, thoughtfully. Then he said, "We must have a doctor and an ambulance. And where's the second operator?"

"Tied and gagged in bed," Steven-Blair told him, indifferently. He lapsed into wounded, brooding silence over the blasphemy and disaster he had uncovered. Nothing

in the box! The Ark of the Covenant empty! He got suddenly to his feet.

"Where's the nearest telephone?" he demanded. Sylvester told him, three miles down the coast, saying nothing of the 'phone in the bungalow.

"I've got to get to it."

"For ambulance and doctor, yes."

"Ambulance? Oh, that, yes. But great God, man! You don't seem to realize! 998 *is a fraud!* The security of England, of Europe, of half the world, hanging on an empty box!"

Sylvester stared into the white, fanatical face of the outraged physicist, into his blazing, angry eyes. He was filled by compassion for the man, a warm flood of pitiful feeling. He wanted to save him, and pleaded:

"The security is there, as it was before. It depends on no one opening the box."

"I've opened it," Steven-Blair replied, with the black pride of Lucifer. Impatiently, like an adult trying to save a child from the consequences of its inexperience, Sylvester said:

"But you're not forced to open your mouth as well."

Steven-Blair stared back at Sylvester but he did not seem to have heard his words. Where now was his graceful pose of a superstitious, ordinary chap? He was hard, rigid, tense, burning with jealous anger, a pillar of righteous indignation. Half to himself he said:

"Back they go, back . . . saints, virgins, crucified gods, an empty box, abracadabra."

Sylvester still pleaded with the man, pleaded for both their lives:

"It's the name on the box that counts, the word." He was not sure what he meant, but the speech seemed to make a kind of super-sense, like the first draft of a poem

as the poet emerges from the creative trance. He thrust the argument on the other's attention by the intensity with which he spoke. But Steven-Blair ignored it; he was saying:

"I must get the President of the Royal Society, the Editor of *Nature*, and *The Times*. Lord Singleton, the Prime Minister . . ."

"Listen to me, can't you?" Sylvester insisted. "Before you do anything, think of the consequences. You're going to put fear back in charge of us, to make us——" he groped for eloquence, for the word which would convince, "to make us what we were before 998, when we lived by the truth of science, mean, frightened, truculent and uncharitable."

"Truth," Steven-Blair picked out the word, "that's what I serve."

"Yes," Sylvester said, "I'm afraid that's so. But there is . . ." again he hesitated, unused to being grave, unfamiliar with serious words. He found a word which he had known, but only now understood ". . . charity."

"Charity? Oh, the Bible. But we . . . I live by *truth*."

Sylvester gave up, accepted the last boast in silence and turned away instinctively, although to the other his face was already in darkness, to say, with something like sullen resignation:

"I'll take you to the village and 'phone for help."

"Come on then, there's no time to waste."

"Pull the body outside," Sylvester said, "I'm going for a better lamp."

He slipped out into the darkness, across in the shadow of the Post to the bungalow. Inside, he untied, ungagged the operator, whispered to him to 'phone his highest authority for help, in five minutes' time. He took the man's big torch, and went back to Steven-Blair, who had the

body of Sir Isador out in the open. Sylvester helped him to carry Betty out and lay her gently in the grass. He shut the door of the Post.

Sylvester pointed out the path and took the lead, Steven-Blair following close behind him. It was two-o'clock, cold and still. The cliff path led east, along a small inlet, and presently the moon rose out of the sea and flung towards them a wide train of shimmering silver. Steven-Blair, oppressed by his own excitement, and perhaps by the unearthly beauty of the night, began to talk, but Sylvester could hear him only by turning his head a little towards his shoulder, and caught only fragments of the monologue—*outrage on truth—dignity of knowledge—integrity of research*—and again, *truth, truth, truth*. There could be no doubt left that Dr. Steven-Blair could have answered jesting Pilate: truth, he would have said, is the square root of minus one; truth is gamma radiation and alpha particles; Planck's Constant is truth.

The fragments of his companion's discourse which Sylvester heard as he led him along the falling path, seemed to age him. In the silver light his mouth was thin and hard and black, his eyes dull. Lines, which had hardly been there before, deepened on his face.

They came to a narrow edge on which the path dipped far below the cliff top, but it did not frighten Sylvester, for another fear filled him, cold and heavy, a lump of pain like ice in the stomach. It excluded the fear of the precipice. Deliberately, he set his imagination to work. If one went over that edge, conscious, what would be the agony of that fall, that waiting for the rocks to break his body? Well, but it could not last long, a falling body accelerated at thirty-two feet per second, per second. Idiotically, he began to calculate.

"Nasty spot, this," he heard Steven-Blair say, and at that

he hesitated no longer, but whirled in the path and took a step back towards the other. Steven-Blair stopped short and raised his eyes from the path, alarmed. Sylvester's attitude and expression, whatever the compassion he felt, must have been menacing: the moon shone into Steven-Blair's eyes and, for a moment, Sylvester saw terror there.

He had taken only one step towards the physicist and then stopped, his purpose paralyzed by Steven-Blair's fear. Furiously, he damned his own infirmity, but it was useless, he could not escape from what he was, he was a twentieth-century man, he could kill ten thousand with indifference by pressing a button, but as for violence with his hands—to wring a chicken's neck would turn him sick.

He made one immense effort to recapture his mood of certainty, but his arms were clamped to his sides by respect for the other man's fear, the other man's individual life. Steven-Blair was still staring at him with nervous alertness. Sylvester said:

"I'm afraid of heights. My nerve's gone."

"Oh, bad luck," his companion said. "Here, let me go first."

With a coolness incredible to Sylvester, Steven-Blair walked past him on the very lip of the path. Now wretchedly fearful, Sylvester followed, pressing his shrinking body into the rock on his left, away from the fall.

When the path broadened, and mounted the cliff-top to move away from the edge, Sylvester caught up with Steven-Blair. He knew that there was still something left which he could do, and he said:

"Look, I can't explain now, but it happens I can take you to the man who knows more about this than anyone in Europe."

The physicist stopped and the two men confronted each other in the moonlight.

"Who *are* you?" Steven-Blair asked.

"Sylvester Green."

"What! The impostor who——"

"There was no impostor. Oh, yes, I'm dead. But only officially."

For some reason Steven-Blair believed him. He just nodded in silence. Then, as they came in sight of the village, they began suddenly to run as if their business had become more urgent than ever.

35

ADMIRAL ST. JUST, with his eyes cast down as though his modesty did not permit him to look directly at a man who had broken faith, said, frostily:

"Well, Mr. Grant?"

Sylvester stood rigidly at attention. It gave him a feeling of confidence to do so, a feeling that he again belonged to what was larger than himself. He said:

"I was camping near Speesham, in Cumberland, sir . . ."

The report was admirably delivered, cold, precise and curt, and the Admiral listened to it in silence, allowing nothing of his consternation to appear on his face. When he spoke again, if there was not one tiny quantum of warmth in his voice, there was no hostility either.

"This Steven-Blair?"

"I've got him outside, sir. He's waiting. I've had the greatest difficulty in keeping him away from the telephone."

The Admiral rose and walked towards the door of his office: half-way across, he hesitated, then looked back at Sylvester and said, coldly enough, but with emphasis:

"You've done well, Lieutenant Green."

Sylvester said nothing, but the use of his real name and rank meant something to him, he was less miserable than he had been since his failure on the cliff. St. Just opened his door, put his head into the ante-room and spoke Steven-Blair's name, who came in hurriedly, as if he were angry at being kept waiting. But before he could say anything, the Admiral had seized and shaken his hand, smiling gravely, with that respect and confidence which great men give each other.

"This is a shocking business," he said.

"Shocking! It's the most abominable thing I've ever heard of. I agreed to come to you, Admiral, because Green, if he *is* Green, insisted that you're the man. But there must be no question of any damned political discretion. This is . . . blasphemy!"

"My dear fellow! As if I didn't know! But we must keep our heads, we——"

"Are you implying that I've lost mine, because let me——"

"On the contrary, I wish I were half as cool. But there's a chap we must see, Lassen. He's the man. Sir Lewis Lassen. And then the Prime Minister. And I think that fellow Hyman Pflumbaum is still in London."

"Very well," Steven-Blair agreed, grimly, "but let's waste no more time."

The Admiral used his 'phone to give an order, and presently the three men went downstairs and into the

Admiral's car, and so down Whitehall to the offices where Sir Lewis worked. As they were going up in the lift, St. Just said:

"I'll see him alone first. Touchy bird."

Steven-Blair scowled but did not object. The Admiral went into Lassen's office, leaving the other two in the ante-room. They did not talk. Steven-Blair sat vibrant with indignation, with the excitement of great events, of enormously important changes and decisions initiated by himself. Sylvester slouched in his chair, the virtue of his lonely, Cumberland nights gone out of him, the echo of the Admiral's "*Lieutenant Green*" rapidly fading. He could feel himself slipping back into the paper character of Sylvester Grant.

They were kept so long sitting there that Steven-Blair became impatient, chafed, got up to pace the room, stared through the dirty window into the street, and drummed the glass with his fingers. He muttered angrily, and Sylvester looked up, mildly curious, and then dropped his eyes again. He was patient, he was not waiting for anything now. They heard someone telephoning from the inner room. At last St. Just and Lassen, pale, grave and businesslike, came out, ready for the street. St. Just presented Dr. Steven-Blair but ignored Sylvester.

"We are going directly to the Prime Minister," Lassen said, as he led the way out of the building. Sylvester trailed after the others because he supposed he was meant to. He got into the car beside the chauffeur and heard Sir Lewis saying:

"Dr. Pflumbaum has been sent for. He will be with the Prime Minister by now."

For Sylvester there was still nothing but waiting for nothing. He sat in a small lobby at No. 10 and stared at the wall, later at his feet. He was not impressed by being

in this famous house, because he seemed to himself to be there by accident, a stray wandered in from the street. His hands were folded in his lap and he was quite still. Lassen and the Admiral were received by the Prime Minister, but they were not with him long, and when they came out Dr. Pflumbaum was with them. At least, Sylvester supposed that their companion was the famous physicist, a short, solid, inscrutable man with dead eyes, whom Sylvester saw in the corridor through the open door of his lobby. Then Dr. Steven-Blair went in to the Prime Minister, alone.

Steven-Blair, despite his righteous and Protestant anger, his assurance become arrogance now that the whip was in his hand, did not enter that room without a certain feeling of respect, a certain tendency, as it were, to sheath his dagger and mend his manners. It was not, of course, the man he respected, but the office. The statesman stood with his shoulders leaning on the mantelpiece, his back to the empty grate, his hands in his jacket pockets. He walked more slowly to greet his visitor than the latter moved forward to be greeted. He held out his hand, looking into the physicist's eyes with a weighing and measuring glance which was wholly effective. Steven-Blair, who read the penny papers, had expected a Party hack, an organizer of no great ability, for so a hostile gutter press presented this man. Steven-Blair saw that he was at fault: this was no little man standing in a great place. Office itself conveys authority to the manner of an official, but the Prime Minister was a formidable man in his own right.

The Prime Minister said not a word, just shook Steven-Blair's hand, waved him to a chair, waited courteously until the visitor was seated, returned to his perch on the fender, and began to stuff his pipe. Oppressed, Steven-Blair said, rather defiantly:

"This is a terrible business, sir."

"Terrible?" The Prime Minister seemed to weigh the word, to turn it over and then, mouth pursed, to reject it. "Awkward, certainly," he conceded.

"Awkward!" Steven-Blair was stung into a revival of his anger at that trivial word, and flushed darkly. "Awkward!" He clenched his hands. "A whole international comity hangs on a thread, and *you* call it awkward. Oh, my God!" He stood up. The Prime Minister watched him with, apparently, mild interest, as if he were an ingenious mechanical toy. The toy (but how ingenious it was, to be sure!) went on speaking, with gestures.

"I have the greatest respect for you and your office. But I must ask you to excuse me. I feel bound to ask the advice of the President of the Royal Society, at this juncture, and before I . . ."

"Do sit *down*, Doctor—er—Steven-Blair." The Prime Minister spoke now with a kind of elderly peevishness, and then, as the other still hesitated, he went on with great sternness:

"It would interest me to know, at some other time, what the devil you take us for? I fear that you have been reading the less responsible newspapers."

Steven-Blair sat down again and said sulkily:

"You can't get away from the fact. The Post was empty."

"And so . . ." the Prime Minister said, crossing to his own chair, throwing himself into it, folding his hands before him on the desk, and regarding his visitor with the mild curiosity of a man who, no longer capable of surprise, has by no means lost interest in the eccentric, ". . . and so you make the outrageous assumption that the other eighteen thousand Posts are in the same condition. Very remarkable!"

Suddenly, Steven-Blair knew himself for a fool, was deflated, and saw that he had been led into a ridiculous situation, into heroics, into making a complete ass of himself. He dropped his eyes and turned white.

"You mean . . ." he began, and then fell silent, for the Prime Minister was fussing with papers, looking for something. He found a sheet of typescript, put on his spectacles, peered, and said:

"Dr. Pflumbaum . . . you know him? No? Pity, a very level-headed fellow . . . at all events he tells me that there are still . . . where is it? . . . ah, yes, eight hundred and seven Posts still not completed."

He threw down the paper, a rather curt note from his bank manager, and sat back in his chair, assuming the expression of an absorbed lecturer:

"You know, Dr. Steven-Blair, your problems and ours are not at all of the same order. Ours are immediate. We were faced with a war situation of the most critical kind. We were offered an extraordinarily effective defensive device. We could not complete all the units of the chain of Posts in time to . . . er . . . forestall other events. But we proceeded nevertheless. Do you know why? Because the strength of such things is in what people believe concerning them, in the common man's faith in people of *your* order. But this does not put you above and outside the pale of citizenship. On the contrary, you have your responsibilities not merely to your science, but, much more important, to your fellows. And now . . ." the speaker leaned across his desk and spoke with great earnestness, "will you tell me what, in God's name, led a man like *you* to break the law, to commit assault, to allow an old fool . . . oh, yes, a distinguished man in his way, but a fool . . . to go to his death?"

Steven-Blair made no attempt to reply, but sat with his

face hidden behind the hand which supported his forehead. He was ashamed and afraid. With decent kindness, the Prime Minister got up and walked over to the window. He stared out, giving the physicist time to recover his self-control, yet not letting him speak, for he turned to him again and went on:

"We could prosecute you, you could be placed under arrest at this moment, and you would certainly get a longish term of penal servitude. You could not touch *us*. I have been accused of going back to Star Chamber methods in our political-scientific trials. But who forced us back? Who devised the means whereby men could make the lives of every fellow man upon the planet as precarious as—as a French Cabinet? *You* did, you and your kind. If I have to go back to the Star Chamber, to the rack and thumbscrew if you like, in order to save London from being a second Nagasaki, then, doctor, so I will. You have not answered my question?"

Steven-Blair looked up and tried to take hold of himself, to return from his vision of himself rotting in a cell.

"I," he began, "I . . ."

"Allow me to answer for you," the Prime Minister said, gently. "You did the things I have accused you of because you are a very brave man, because you refused to accept the popular legend, because you have a conscience, an integrity as rare as any qualities of which I have experience. A man who will set the law at nought, put aside his ingrained respect for authority, risk not only his career but even his life at the behest of his profession's honor, such a man, doctor, we want, we need, and we must have. Dr. Steven-Blair, I have the honor to offer you a new post which we are creating, Secretary of State for Scientific Planning. The salary, not that that matters, will be eight thousand a year. I may add that Dr. Pflumbaum, in so far as

Britain is concerned, will be directly responsible to the Minister."

Steven-Blair, as the panegyric he had just heard developed, had got to his feet, gaping, astounded, gratified. He had already seen himself imprisoned, broken, disgraced, faced not by the rising honors of a great career, but by thirty years of decline into misery. Hardly could he survive the shock of the translation from that, to this other picture, honor, power, wealth. He said:

"But—I can't believe—me—*why*?"

And even as he spoke, he knew the answer to his own unuttered question, knew it with the certainty which no intelligence, but only a penetrating, intuitive insight can give. 998 *was* a colossal fraud. He had felt shamed for nothing. He had been dead right. Not eight hundred, but eighteen thousand of those metal towers were as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard.

"Well, sir," the Prime Minister was saying, with an eagerness which, despite what Steven-Blair was so certain of, and was already suppressing with all the subconscious energy of an ambitious man, was enormously flattering, "well, sir, are we to have you with us? Your research work must go on, of course. But . . . will you lend us a hand?"

Winningly he held out his own right hand. Without hesitation, and with enormous respect, Steven-Blair seized it in his own and wrung it with a nervous spasm of emotional loyalty.

"I accept," he said, firmly.

AT her desk in Brindlehough's reception office, the pasty-faced girl sat behind her typewriter and chewed her gum with the mechanical persistence of a ruminant. Sylvester sat on a hard chair and stared at his hands, folded in his lap. The door from Mr. Brindlehough's private office opened and the manager backed out saying, "Yes, Mr. Brindlehough," and, "I'll see to it, Mr. Brindlehough," punctuating the high, peevish monologue of the Managing Director's complaints. He shut the door and turned, very red in the face, towards the room. He saw Sylvester and snapped:

"You again? Grant, isn't it? Where the hell did you get to?"

"I've been ill, sir," Sylvester said.

"You should've let us know. It's people like you. . . . I suppose you want your job back?"

"Yes, please, sir."

"Well, I don't know . . . but there, the fact is I can't afford to turn you down. Report to Clough." He turned away, harassed, bustling. "Here, Miss Bottom, get me the Ministry of Supply. It's people like them . . ."

Sylvester, walking heavily, went down to the welding shop. Welding tools were crackling and arcing in the welder's hands. Clough finished a weld, pushed back his eyeshield, raised his head and saw Sylvester. He opened his mouth to speak to him, and then, really seeing his face, changed his mind and said nothing. This was not the youth he had briefly and sympathetically known, who owed him

money. This Sylvester was another (Sylvester Grant indeed, but Clough was not to know it in those terms). This newcomer bore, as to the manner born, the stigmata of poverty and obedience.

"Hallo chum," Clough said, at last, and knowing that he had no words to express his feelings, took refuge in the practical. He jerked his thumb towards a 998 antenna, already clamped in a vice.

"Get cracking on that one, will you?" he said. "We're all behind."

Sylvester put on an eyeshade, fixed a rod of welding metal in the tool which lay beside the vice, switched on the current, struck an arc, and began to weld. Behind the mica mask his eyes were too dull to reflect the brilliant flame of the sputtering arc.

THE END

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